

TIMOTHY HERRING SERIES

Your
SECRET
FRIEND



GLADYS
MITCHELL

writing as

MALCOLM TORRIE

YOUR SECRET
FRIEND

Titles by Gladys Mitchell

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YOUR SECRET FRIEND

GLADYS MITCHELL WRITING
AS MALCOLM TORRIE

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

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To ELIZABETH and PATRICIA my much-loved sisters-in-law

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CHAPTER ONE

Monkshood Mill

Thirteen cottages, a public house called the *Purfleet Arms*, the mill from which the hamlet takes its name, together with a Georgian mansion known as Purfleet Hall and a small, sequestered Early English church dedicated to Saint Simon Zelotes, make up Monkshood Mill.

The river which, half a century ago, was still being used to work the mill, is weedy now, grown over with coarse water-cresses and, in places, with the poppy-head flowers of the yellow water-lily. It still tends to flood in early spring and there is a painted line on the customers' side of the bar in the taproom of the *Purfleet Arms* to mark high-water level during the near disastrous floods of 1931.

It was the mill which Timothy Herring had come to see. The Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest, of which he was honorary secretary, had asked him to go down and look it over. It had been recommended to his committee by a woman member whose special gift, as Timothy sometimes sourly pointed out, was to get him sent on fools' errands.

This turned out to be another of them. He drove southwards from his Cotswold home to discover that the mill had been turned into a restaurant with rose-gardens on its river frontage and clematis and honeysuckle on its roadside wall. It was beautifully kept, retained much of its original character, and served a most respectable lunch. He studied it from the road, from the interior, and from the river bank,

and then smoked a pensive pipe while he looked out over the water-meadows on the further shore and watched a flotilla of ducks on what had once been the millpond.

Coming upon the hamlet from the east side, he had not driven past the church, but he had spotted it upon its slight eminence and he decided to stroll along and take a look at it before he drove home. It was an unremarkable but disarming little edifice. It had a lych-gate, an overgrown churchyard in which the eighteenth-century tombstones leaned drunkenly and the mausoleum which housed the defunct lords of the manor was covered in moss. The chancel was unspoilt Early English with three narrow lights at the east end, and the buttresses along the north and south walls were flattish, plain, and had the usual gable offsets. In all, a typical, unpretentious, pleasant little building with nothing outstanding about it except (as he noticed when he went in by the porch and the south door) for a remarkably fine fifteenth-century font reminiscent, to him, of the Seven Sacraments font at East Dereham in Norfolk.

Timothy was admiring this font when he was addressed by a middle-aged woman wearing a summer frock, a cardigan, and an unfashionable hat, who, on the Saturday afternoon, was arranging the flowers for Sunday.

"Ah," she said, as soon as he turned away from the font, "how kind of you to come. Mrs. Gorman promised she would send somebody. Too bad, her falling off the step-ladder cutting back that tiresome creeper. She must be badly shaken up. What a mercy she didn't break a leg! Now if you'll just explore underneath the tower, you will find some big vases for the delphiniums. The water-tap is outside, at the top of the steps to the crypt."

Timothy pulled aside the curtain which hid the tower junk-hole from the rest of the church and sorted out two tall brass jugs and a couple of earthenware pitchers. These he

filled and brought back to the chancel step, whereon lay a large heap of assorted flowers and greenery.

"That's it," said the woman. "Now, if you'll do the picking out, I'll do the arranging. Isn't it good of the school to send us so much out of their garden? I hardly know how we should manage without it."

Timothy, selecting the long, fire-blue spikes of delphinium from out of the lavish heap, remarked upon the beauty and size of the blooms.

"Yes, indeed," the woman assented, taking the inflorescences as he offered them, "there are no finer delphiniums in the county except, perhaps, those in the dove-cote gardens at Athelhampton and those at Compton Acres. Of course, the school has kept on Sir Thomas Purfleet's gardeners, Bob and Ted Short, and that makes a difference, no doubt, but we hardly dared hope the headmistress would keep up the tradition of the church flowers."

"Which school will that be?" Timothy enquired.

"Oh, dear! You *are* a stranger to the place! I should have thought Mrs. Gorman would have told you, but perhaps it's stale news now. Some years ago Sir Thomas sold Purfleet Hall and the estate was bought by the trustees of a boarding school for girls which needed bigger premises. It's called Purfleet Hall School now, but very little has been changed."

"Good," said Timothy. "Well, that seems to be the lot, so far as the delphiniums are concerned. What comes next?"

What came next was a village maiden aged about fifteen years.

"Sorry I'm late, Mrs. Cox," she said. "Mrs. Gorman wanted some shopping from Wimborne, so I had to go on me bike."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Cox, gazing in consternation at Timothy. "I'm terribly sorry! I mean, I took it for granted—oh, dear! Here have I been ordering you

about as though I knew who you were! I took you for Mrs. Gorman's nephew! I know she's expecting him, so I had no idea . . ."

"It's quite all right. Glad to help," said Timothy. "By the way, talking of Purfleet Hall, I suppose that's the house which I saw from the road as I drove to the mill. It looks a particularly fine place. As it's now a school, do you think there's the slightest chance I might be shown over it? I mean, a school isn't exactly a private residence, is it?"

"Gloria, dear," said Mrs. Cox, "go and find the vases for the chancel windows and then sort out the carnations. Well, I don't know, I'm sure," she went on, turning again to Timothy. "Are you a prospective father, by any chance?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm not married."

"Oh, well, Miss Pomfret-Brown is a little bit starchy, you know. I doubt very much whether she'll let you look over the house unless you've got a special reason."

"I think I'll try, all the same, I'm interested in old houses. Now is there anything more I can do for you here before I go?"

"Oh, no, really, thank you. Gloria and I can manage. You say you are interested in old houses? Well, then, you really ought to go and look at Little Monkshood. I'm sure that's *very* old; much older than Purfleet Hall, I should think. It's only about three miles up the road, towards Dorchester. It lies well back, up a lane, but there's a signpost. Of course, it's quite a neglected place now, but it's up for sale, so nobody will say anything if you go and look at it. Mr. Trimble, at the mill, has the key, if you want to go inside."

Timothy was accustomed to receive encouraging and ill-informed statements about buildings that were "very old." The majority of English people, he had good reason to know, were indifferent to the centuries of building which lay between 1150 and 1550. Nothing but the uncompromising, massive, time-defying style of the Normans seemed to him to have forced itself upon their consciousness. The

realisation that the thirteenth was not the fifteenth century, and that "Tudor style" was not necessarily related to the sixteenth century, seemed to have passed them by.

However, being, above all things, careful and conscientious so far as his voluntary job was concerned, Timothy decided that, as, in any case, his homeward drive could take him past the end of the lane which led to it, he would look at Little Monkshood in the hope, but not the expectation, that it would repay a visit. His sights were set on Purfleet Hall.

Unlike most houses of its size, this one was not hidden from the public gaze by high walls and immemorial elms, but stood boldly out upon its treeless eminence, a well-proportioned, austere mansion whose only concession to elegance and the picturesque was an impressive portico in the Roman-Corinthian style of James Wyatt. A long drive led past a big lodge at the wrought-iron open gates, and on either side of the drive tennis courts had been laid out and the pleasant plonking of balls struck by tennis rackets accompanied Timothy almost as far as the magnificent outside double staircase which led to the front door.

This, like the lodge gates, was wide open and on an artist's easel a neat notice in beautiful Italianate script rendered in Indian ink upon a square of cardboard read: *Please ring and enter.* Timothy obeyed, and from the nearest doorway on his left a young woman emerged.

"Good afternoon," she said. "Have you an appointment with Miss Pomfret-Brown?"

"No, I'm afraid not." He produced Phisbe's official card. "This is my excuse for troubling you."

"Mr. Timothy Francis Herring. The Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest," she read aloud. "I see. Well, I shouldn't think we need preserving at present. The whole house was done up at considerable expense just before the school moved in."

"Oh, yes, I can see that," said Timothy. "Is there any possibility that I might be allowed to see the principal

rooms? I really came to look at the mill, but that doesn't need restoring either."

The young woman looked doubtful.

"Have a look round the school? Well, I suppose I could *ask*," she said. "Miss Pomfret-Brown is out this afternoon, so it will have to be Miss Salter. Excuse me." She retreated through double doors at the end of the hall and Timothy studied the ceiling and was still admiring the details of its plaster-work when his messenger reappeared accompanied by an older woman wearing a lime-green linen frock and a dark-green cardigan. She came up and offered her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Herring. I know all about your Society, of course, and quite an amount about *you*. We have your cousin, Miss Bounty, on the staff, as I suppose you know. I'm afraid she's out this afternoon—quite a number of people like to take themselves to Bournemouth, and so forth, on Saturdays in the summer—but if you would like to look over the school I shall be very happy to show you round."

Timothy had seldom any occasion to feel grateful to his cousin April Bounty. She was regarded by the family, in fact, as its stormy petrel, and fell in and out of jobs and friendships with such rapidity that it was beyond her relatives' capacity to keep up either with the latest form of employment or the current crush.

The room into which he had entered was the hall, and, according to the fashion of the time in which it had been built, it was by far the largest room in the house. It was in Robert Adam's Roman style, with impressive Corinthian pillars down either side and, at both ends, round-headed niches for statuary. There were more columns, similar to the others, on either side of the doorways.

His guide led him through an archway into the room from which the girl who had greeted him had emerged, and in which she now was seated at a very fine mahogany desk of the Chippendale period.

“This used to be the family’s music room,” said Miss Salter, “but now it’s the secretary’s office. That corridor leading off from it goes to Miss Pomfret-Brown’s private apartments in the south wing, so I can’t take you there. Through here is the drawing-room, in which Miss Pomfret-Brown entertains parents, and this”—leading him through a doorway—“is the library.”

From the library they passed through another doorway into the splendid salon which lay at the lower end of the hall. This room was domed and contained alcoves intended for statuary or pedestalled urns. The floor was boarded in oak, polished to brilliance, and extremely slippery, and the only piece of furniture was a grand piano.

“This is the deportment room,” explained Miss Salter, “and is also used for choir practice. The music room itself is upstairs, but I shall not take you beyond this floor, because the rest of the house, as you can imagine, is mostly classrooms and dormitories. Through here is what used to be the boudoir belonging to Lady Purfleet, with her bedroom next door, but the Sixth have the boudoir as their ‘quiet’ room and the bedroom is now the staff common-room. Oh, I see it’s occupied! So sorry, Vere! I am just showing Mr. Herring the principal rooms. Mr. Herring, Miss Vere Pallis. Mr. Herring represents the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest . . .”

“Known to its members as Phisbe,” said Timothy. “How do you do, Miss Pallis?”

“How do you do,” said the spare, unsmiling woman.

“Vere teaches chemistry and physics,” explained Miss Salter, when they had left her and had closed the door. “We have half-sisters here, Miss Vere, who is the older by several years, and Miss Marchmont, who teaches history. This room we are in was the dining-room and, as you can see, it still is. That corridor, which corresponds to the one you saw on the other side of the hall, leads to a back staircase, the kitchen regions and the servants’ quarters, so we won’t go there.

Well, that is all I can show you, I'm afraid, in Miss Pomfret-Brown's absence."

"Thank you very much indeed," said Timothy. I have enjoyed that."

"There's something else in the neighbourhood you might enjoy, I think. Have you ever heard of Little Monkshood?"

"I went to look at the church, and the lady who was doing the flowers mentioned it."

"Oh, Mrs. Cox, I expect. Well, Marchmont Pallis is tremendously interested in it. She thinks it was built in the thirteenth century. Of course, it was a good deal altered by the farming family who lived there, I believe, but she says there have been no structural alterations that would matter. Why don't you go and have a look at it, if you have the time to spare? It's only about three miles down the Dorchester road. Mr. Trimble, at the mill, has the key."

"Thirteenth century?" said Timothy. "I wonder whether she's right? If she teaches history, she probably is. Thank you, I'll certainly take a look at it." He glanced at his watch. "Yes, I've a dinner date at Bradford-on-Avon, but I've plenty of time."

He called at the mill and asked for the key.

"Have to get your deposit down as soon as you can, if you're thinking of buying," said Trimble, a Londoner who had seen the possibilities of the mill as a restaurant and who was well on the way to getting back the money he had spent on it. "A couple of ladies are interested."

"Miss Marchmont Pallis?" asked Timothy.

"Oh, I see. You're going to look it over on behalf of the school, are you? Well, it looks ramshackle, I'll admit, but the fabric is sound enough. The house has stood for five hundred years or more, and it'll stand as long again, I shouldn't wonder."

"Which way do I take?" asked Timothy.

“Turn to the left and follow the road, that’s all. It’s about three miles. You can’t miss it if you look out for the lane that leads up to it. The signboard is still there. It says *Little Monkshood Farm Only*, but the house is empty now, and for many years the farm has been no more than a small-holding. If you’d care to make me your agent, I might be able to get something knocked off the price, not that I know what’s being asked for it. But you’ll have to get your word in quick, if you want to beat the ladies to it.”

Timothy drove off in the direction indicated, spotted the signboard, and turned into a narrow lane. It ran uphill on a gradual slope and, at the last bend, the farmhouse came into view. A five-barred gate, partly broken, opened on to a rough piece of ground which had been a chicken farm. Beyond this was a two-storey stone-built house. Timothy left his car in the lane and walked along the track made by a lorry.

The house had the forlorn and yet somewhat sinister appearance of all abandoned stone buildings. It had an outside stone staircase leading to a bricked-up doorway on the first floor. In the brickwork a small, ugly window had been inserted. The chimney stack, built out from the end wall, was partly the original one, but the top part had been roughly repaired.

Timothy, interested (for there was no doubt that Miss Marchmont Pallis was right) in indications that the house did indeed date from the thirteenth century, strolled round to the back of the building. An ugly wing had been added which partially enclosed a small courtyard, and on this side of the original building some sash windows and a back door had been inserted on the ground floor. Timothy returned to the front of the house. Below the blocked doorway was one of nineteenth-century date and a couple of very small windows had been added at the sides of two thirteenth-century slits. Very pleasing additions to the house had been made in the sixteenth century. Two magnificent windows, to

which Timothy assigned a date in the late years of the Tudor period, graced what, he deduced, had been the great hall and the solar of the original building. At some time in its history Little Monkshood had been something more than a farmhouse. So much might well be surmised.

He tried the key in the Victorian door which had been hacked out on the ground floor, and found himself in what had been the undercroft, but which had been converted into a farmhouse kitchen and a living-room. The ceiling was low. Timothy stood six feet two, and there was barely a foot of clearance above his head. A row of pillars divided the undercroft into two equal parts and had served to separate the cooking-space, in which a kitchen range had been installed, from the living-room, but there was no sink. The washing-up and the washing must have been done by the last occupants in an outhouse, Timothy supposed, and further exploration, when he had concluded his survey of the house, proved that this had been the case.

A newel staircase in the thickness of the wall at one of the angles led to the floor above. Here, as he had supposed, were the principal rooms. When the house was built they had consisted of a great hall and a solar, but in the fourteenth century a second chamber had been added. The farmer, however, whose family had needed more privacy than its forebears, had partitioned these magnificent examples of medieval domesticity into five bedrooms and a parlour. Ceilings had been added and it was not until Timothy had ascended a loft ladder into what were now the attics that he could see the full beauty of the timbered roof.

The rafters, it was obvious, had been repaired and occasionally replaced over the centuries, but their original structure remained unaltered. Taking the farmhouse as a whole, Timothy thought that it had been a small manor house, unfortified, but of local importance when it was built.

He studied the rafters. The roof was of the box-frame construction to be expected in Dorset, with butt purlins

supporting the common rafters. It was double-framed, and the purlins rested upon principals placed at regular intervals to bridge the width of the building. A collar purlin supported on a crown-post held the collar rafters, these were further supported by struts and the whole was strengthened by wall-posts based on stone corbels.

"Very nice," said Timothy. He descended the ladder, stared resentfully up at the ceiling which hid the rafters from below, descended the dark, winding little stair to the undercroft, let himself out, locked the Victorian front door, and returned the key to the mill.

"You said you had no idea what they're asking for the place?" he enquired.

"No idea at all, sir. Lucky to get a few hundreds I should think. What could you do with a queer old building like that? The land isn't much good, either. The last tenants were chicken farmers, but they couldn't make it pay. Everybody sells eggs around here. Besides, there's no gas or electricity laid on, and it's cesspool drainage and every drop of water to be fetched up from a well. There isn't even a pump. But, of course, if it's to be made a sort of annexe to the school, perhaps they'd manage."

"When did the last tenants move out?"

"Oh, some time before I came here."

"But you hold the key?"

"Ah. Sir Thomas left it with me when he sold Purfleet Hall to the school. He'd like to sell Little Monkshood if he could. As to what he'd take for it, well, if it was mine, I'd close pronto with the first bid of five hundred pounds, but the Purfleets would want more than that, I daresay, especially if the school was in the market. Needs to expand, I expect. Sir Thomas won't let 'em enlarge Purfleet Hall, although I did hear tell that he'd let 'em build extra classrooms, provided they sited 'em proper, dotted about the park."

CHAPTER TWO

Purfleet of Purfleet Hall

Timothy kept his dinner date and then, very late in the evening, drove home to his house in the Cotswolds, and on the Monday morning rang up the Phisbe headquarters in London. Coningsby, called irreverently by Timothy, “our dogsbody,” although never, of course, in his hearing, answered the telephone. He was a serious, ultra-conscientious young man, efficient and enthusiastic, who was in charge of the Society’s archives and who dealt with its correspondence.

“Oh, Coningsby?”

“Speaking.”

“Herring here. Have we any record of a thirteenth-century farmhouse called Little Monkshood? It’s about three miles north-west of the village of Monkshood Mill in the county of Dorset.”

“Yes, I think so, Mr. Herring. One of our members noted the property in 1953 and reported on it to the committee, but the house was then in occupation. If you will hold the line I will look up the details.”

“Right. Thanks.” There was a break of three minutes.

“Here we are, Mr. Herring. Little Monkshood was noticed by our committee member, Lady Grace Norton, when she was visiting friends at Purfleet Hall, which, I believe, has since been sold. She called on the owners, or, rather, the tenants, of Little Monkshood and was able to inspect the house, although the people who showed her over it were

unimpressed when she pointed out the historic significance of the structure. She then suggested that it should be put into the care of our Society, who might be prepared to restore it to its original appearance, but the owner, a Sir Thomas Purfleet, said he wouldn't have the place altered against the wishes of his tenants.

"According to Lady Grace Norton, the thirteenth-century building had been re-roofed with modern tiles, ceilings had been inserted, blocking out the original beams and rafters, two walled fireplaces had been bricked in and the principal rooms on the first floor, consisting originally of the Great Hall, a second chamber and the solar, had been partitioned and screened off to convert them into a parlour and bedrooms. The outside stone staircase remains, and it was this, coupled with a thirteenth-century bricked-in doorway above it, which first attracted Lady Grace Norton's attention."

"I see. Well, thanks very much, Coningsby. I'll go along and have another look at it. It might be well worth our while to get a title to it and do it up. Have you any idea where Sir Thomas Purfleet hangs out?"

"No, Mr. Herring, but if he has a London address no doubt he will be in the book, and, if not, I could ring up Lady Grace, who will be sure to know where he lives, and so will Mrs. Miles who, if you remember, suggested at the last committee meeting that the Society might be interested in the mill-house at Monkshood Mill. I believe she also was a friend of the Purfleet family."

"Oh, that tiresome old party! She's sent me on more wild-goose chases than the whole of the rest of the members put together! Well, never mind about ringing up Lady Grace. I'll do that myself, and set the ball rolling at once. There's no time to lose, as I believe other parties are interested in buying Little Monkshood."

He rang up Lady Grace at ten o'clock on the following morning, a time when he deduced that she would be

breakfasting in bed. In this he was in error. She had been up for two hours and had just returned from exercising her dogs in the park.

"And what can I do for *you*, darling Timothy?" asked the old lady.

"I wondered whether you could tell me where Sir Thomas Purfleet lives."

"You are not proposing to fight a duel with him, I trust?"

"Why should I?"

"I wondered whether you had one of your loose designs on his wife. He has married for the second time, and is a very jealous and possessive husband."

"I look forward to meeting him. Where can I?"

"At the other Purfleet Hall. It's a few miles out of Northampton, between Northampton and Wellingborough. The signpost says Easton Lutterell."

"Many thanks."

"If you're not fighting a duel, why do you want to see him? Is it Phisbe?"

"Well, I rather hope so. I've seen the house called Little Monkshood, in Dorset."

"It's no good, darling boy. I've tried. He's got smallholders in. They won't budge."

"They *have* budged. The house is empty and up for sale. I'll let you know how I get on."

In spite of an exclamation from the other end of the line, he hung up and rang the president of Phisbe.

Purfleet Hall, differentiated by the family from their former mansion in Dorset by being referred to as Easton Purfleet, was a late seventeenth-century house possibly attributable to Wren. It stood in fairly considerable grounds and a narrow, pleasant stream divided the gardens from the surrounding park. Immediately in front of the house was a paved area which served as a terrace, and, in the middle of this, a large stone basin with fluted edges held goldfish and

water-lilies. Standing beside it when he arrived was one of the most beautiful women Timothy had ever seen.

"Hullo," she said, "you will be Mr. Herring. Come in and meet my husband. He's longing to see you."

If this were so, it was well disguised by Sir Thomas. He was a tall, thin, stooping man in his middle fifties and he put out a limp, bony hand to the visitor, grunted in a suspicious manner, and observed that it was a fine day.

"Seen Earls Barton church?" he asked.

"Many times," Timothy truthfully responded.

"That tower can't be as old as they say. What d'yer think?"

"Tenth century," said Timothy flatly.

"You think so?" The stringy baronet clapped him surprisingly on the shoulder. "And you're an expert, eh?"

"I don't think so."

"This society you represent, then? Phoney?"

"Oh, no, we *have* our experts, but I don't claim to be one of them. I just go round and look at places, you know. I've come about that property of yours in Dorset."

"I've sold it to a girls' school."

"Not Purfleet Hall. Little Monkshood farm."

"Oh, that! What about it?"

"I understand that you're prepared to sell it."

"Look here, if you're bidding against the schoolmarms you're too late. I've given them first option. They've got until next Tuesday to make up their minds. If they jib, you can have the next offer. How's that?"

"Will they leave it as it is, or do it up?"

"It's in pretty good repair. How d'yer mean-do it up?"

"It's a mess as it stands at present—horrible! You've blocked up that doorway at the top of the outside stair, you've let the last tenants muck up that lovely undercroft, and they've put up party walls in the great hall, the solar and the second chamber and inserted some loathsome sash windows and a ground-floor doorway, besides adding on a

horrible wing at the back and blocking up the old fireplaces, some of the earliest wall-fireplaces in existence. My Society would put all this right if we decided to buy the place. How much are you asking for it?"

"Three thousand. Dirt-cheap. There's a good bit of land attached, you know."

"And the place has been empty—how long?"

"Have to look it up."

"And there are no main services, not even tap water."

"The last tenants didn't complain."

"No, but they went."

"The old chap died, and the sons had jobs in Southampton, I believe. Anyway, as I said, I'm tied until after next Tuesday."

"Well, now, supposing your prospective buyers opt out, is there any clause in the agreement which would prevent my Society, *if* we buy, from carrying out alterations and demolition work so as to restore Little Monkshood to its proper shape and make?"

"Not that I know of, and I'd be glad to see it done. I've a written and signed agreement with the school, you know, that they're not to make structural alterations to Purfleet Hall. Wish my grandfather had had the sense to do the same with Little Monkshood, then I might have sold it to the Americans to be shipped over there, stone by stone, and made a decent profit. No, if you buy the place, you can go right ahead. It'll be yours."

"What made you stick a price-tag of three thousand pounds on it? The chap at the mill told me that a few hundreds would be enough to buy it."

"Well, they won't. There's nothing wrong with the fabric and there's the land. What would your Society be prepared to offer, if the schoolmarms decide to back down?"

"I should have to consult my committee."

"Better leave it at that, then. Give me your address, and I'll let you know."

"Of course, if the house is needed as an annexe to the school, I don't suppose they *will* back down. I suppose that, in addition to not letting them build on to Purfleet Hall, they mustn't put up extra classrooms in the grounds."

"Who told you that? I won't let them enlarge the house, of course. Won't let them touch it at all except on the second and third floors, where they've partitioned off dormitories and so forth, I believe. But, so long as they're hidden from the house windows and the drive, they can build extra classrooms where they like, so far as I'm concerned. They're thinking of a laboratory or some such nonsense, I believe."

"Then why do they need Little Monkshood as an annexe? Are they proposing to house some of the staff there?"

"Little Monkshood isn't being opted for by the school as such. It's under option privately. Two ladies."

"Oh, I see. Well, all the more chance of our getting a look in, perhaps. Do you mean that two of the school staff want to *live* there? It seems an odd sort of idea."

"Women *are* odd," said the baronet. "Have to keep an eye on them, you know. Always up to something, aren't they Griselda?" He leered lecherously at his wife.

"Come and have some tea, Mr. Herring," said the beautiful woman.

CHAPTER THREE

Little Monkshood

When Timothy had taken a fancy to an ancient building he did not, as a rule, make an immediate approach to the committee unless a formal inspection had been commissioned by its members. If there came to his private notice anything he thought deserving of Phisbe's attention, his custom was first to drop a hint to his friend Tom Parsons, the Society's architect.

He had made up his mind to adopt this procedure in the case of Little Monkshood and was on the point of telephoning Parsons when he himself received a call. It was from his cousin, April Bounty, and came from Purfleet Hall where, as he had learnt from Miss Salter, April had become a member of the teaching staff.

Timothy, accustomed as he was to his cousin's vagaries and unpredictability, nevertheless listened with disapproval and some disquiet to what she had to say.

"You've *what?*" he demanded incredulously.

"Bought this farmhouse. Why shouldn't we?"

"Why *should* you? That seems more to the point. What on earth do you want with a farmhouse?"

"We want your Phisbe to do it up for us."

"You've got a hope! What's the idea? You're not getting married, are you?"

"Nobody's asked me, sir," she said. "No, we want somewhere quiet, away from the school, where we can write our book."

"We?"

"My senior, Alison Marchmont Pallis, is the other one . . . What did you say?" "Nothing. Go on."

"Well, it's a book that's going to revolutionise history teaching in schools. Marchmont's got it all planned. It's terribly exciting. Besides, if we live out of school, we can't be called upon for extraneous duties like taking prep and supervising dormitories and all those other tiresome chores the resident staff have to do."

"You always were a lazy little toad."

"Don't be nasty. Look, this is the point: Marchmont can pay her share of the house, but I can't pay mine, at least, not nearly all of it. I had an expensive holiday last year, and it's left me with hardly a bean. Will you lend me six hundred and fifty pounds?"

"No."

"But, Tim, it's an investment."

"No."

"You are a stinker, then. Besides, you've seen the house. Well, I think you have. Miss Salter said she'd told you about it."

"You mean Little Monkshood?"

"Yes, of course. If you won't lend me the money—and I do think you might, you know you're rolling . . ."

"Nothing doing."

"Well, listen! I've told Marchmont that your Society is certain to help us. You see, even when we've bought the place, it's still got to be done up, so I'm bringing her over on Saturday and you can give us lunch and then we'll talk. Is that all right?"

"No, of course it isn't, you frightful kid!"

"But, Tim, I've promised Marchmont, so you'd better expect us. One-thirty. We'll come in my little car."

"I hope you get caught in a breathalyser test and quodded."

"Thanks. Well, I'd better ring off. Goodness knows what the school will have to pay for this call! Be seeing you. 'Bye for now."

Timothy rang for his cook.

"Saturday lunch for three, Mrs. Nealons. Something suitable for my girl cousin and a learned lady who will accompany her. Why are we burdened with cousins, do you suppose?"

"They round out the family, sir."

"Does the family need rounding out?"

"It looks better at christenings and weddings, not to mention funerals, sir, to muster a nice attendance. About Saturday's lunch, sir . . ."

"Well, I don't suppose the school provender is anything very special. What do you suggest we could give them for a change?"

"What would you think to a nice prawn cocktail, sir, followed by my chicken done with almonds and thin orange-peel, and for afters my meringues with thick cream, followed by a nice bit of Caerphilly or it might be Wensleydale or Double Gloucester, and a dish of fresh fruit?"

"Couldn't be better, Mrs. Nealons. Make it enough for five, would you? I might ask Mr. and Mrs. Parsons to come along." It had occurred to him that it might be as well to bring Phisbe's architect into the affair at the earliest possible moment. Parsons, however, was not available.

"Come to lunch and stay for dinner on Saturday, and you'll put us up for the night? Awfully good of you, old man, but I'm afraid there's nothing doing. We're off for the week-end to visit Diana's parents."

"Damn!" said Timothy. "I particularly wanted you here."

"Thanks. But why?"

"Well, you know April?"

"For more years than I care to remember. It comes after March and in front of May."

"My cousin, April Bounty."

"Oh, ah, yes. The girl with the swan-like neck."

"If you mean she's in the habit of sticking it out a mile, you're about right. She's thinking of buying an old farmhouse and wants Phisbe to do it up, if you ever heard of such damned cheek."

"Well, look, if you want somebody to back you up and throw cold water on the scheme, why don't you ask the president? His wife's away, so he'll probably be glad of an invitation."

"That's an idea. You see, as it happens, the place is well worth a second thought. I've seen it. The trouble will be to convince April that Phisbe isn't a charitable institution. I mean, if we do up the place for them free of charge, she and this friend of hers will have to agree to show it."

"You think they'll burke at that?"

"I could do with some backing, anyway. Come to think of it, I believe my sister might be a better bet than the president. He's apt to be soft where women are concerned, and April has a habit of riding rough-shod and in all directions, fair and foul, when she intends, as always, to get her own way."

He rang up his sister forthwith.

"I say, you know April?"

"Laughing her girlish laughter, weeping her girlish tears?"

"Don't rot. I want you . . ."

"And after April, if you remember, May follows, and the white-throat builds and . . ."

"For goodness' sake! I want you to help me cope."

"With April? But it's July, dear. The Glorious Fourth. Didn't you know?"

Recognising all this persiflage as his sister's method of indicating that she did not propose to come within miles of her cousin April, Timothy cursed her with brotherly liberality and rang up the president, who accepted the invitation and

expressed himself delighted at the prospect of meeting Timothy's young cousin.

April, informed beforehand of his visit, was equally delighted to be introduced to the fountain head of the Society. She was a plump, reckless-looking blonde beside whom Miss Pallis, her companion, looked faded, gawky, and sallow, although, Timothy decided, her eyes were remarkable. They were deep-set and were of a strange, cloudy blue, the eyes of a visionary—melancholy, far-seeing, unworldly. Another thing which appealed to him about her was her obvious shyness and a vulnerable simplicity which her good breeding and schoolmarm competence could not disguise or hide. She was far more attractive than her severe and virginal half-sister, he decided.

"It's awfully good of you to bother with me," she said, as she gave him her hand. "I believe you've seen this place we're buying."

Timothy introduced the president, who said:

"Yes, Tim tells me he got the key and gave Little Monkshood a fairly thorough going-over."

"I knew we could rely on Phisbe," said April.

"Tim hasn't had a chance to give me much of an outline," said the president cautiously. "What exactly are you proposing that we should do?"

"Up Little Monkshood," said April pertly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, your Society does do up places for people, and Little Monkshood could be a gem. It's horrible at present, because it's dirty and slummy and is all partitions and kitchen ranges and things, but it will be fabulous when it's cleaned out and torn to bits and restored to its original shape. You'll love to do it for us, won't you?"

"Extraordinarily persuasive young woman, your cousin," said the president, when, lunch over, the two schoolmistresses had gone and he was left alone with his host.

"A pain in the neck," said Timothy. "I was half afraid you were going to commit us to drastic action."

"Oh, I couldn't do that until the committee has agreed to it, but it wouldn't hurt for you to bring Parsons into the thing and get him to have something concrete to put before them at the next meeting."

"Right, if you say so, but I think I'd like to look at it again first. It's in a right mess, as I've told you, and, if we do decide it's worthwhile, I think we ought to see to it on our own behalf, not for the sake of my confounded cousin, who isn't able to find her share of the money, anyway."

"What about the other girl—the quiet one?"

"Oh, she seems to be all right. I only hope she knows what she's doing, teaming up with April."

"You don't suppose . . .?"

"Oh, no, not for an instant. Other women aren't April's cuppa, I do know that. No, the little beast's only reason for embarking on this thing is to get out of extraneous duties at school. I feel sorry for Miss Pallis. She's being led up the garden, and I'm going to make jolly sure that Phisbe isn't taken for the same walk. Of course, there's this nonsense about writing a book, but if Miss Pallis thinks that April's young enthusiasm is going to last, she must be more starry-eyed than is good for her. I give April a couple of months of draughts and of things that go bump in the night, and the next thing we shall hear is that she's taken a seaside flat on the south coast and is setting up as a rival to Old Moore's Almanac, and has left Miss Pallis flat."

"Have they actually committed themselves to buying the place, do you think?"

"Well, I was hoping not, but, from the way they spoke, I should say that the whole thing is signed and sealed, and that they've already taken possession of the keys. I'll ring up Sir Thomas Purfleet and find out, although, as a matter of fact, he promised to let me know if these girls decide to take the place. I went to see him, you know."

"Of course I didn't know. You were prepared to commit us, then?"

"I was prepared to take an option on the house. It's something quite out of the ordinary, and I didn't want somebody else muscling in if the two girls turned it down. The beauty of it is that it's complete. There are later additions, but, so far as I could determine—I'll have to get Parsons on to it, of course, because it needs an architect's eye—the extra bits of horror could come off without any serious damage to the original fabric. The place is another Boothby Pagnell, except that it's a century later. We simply can't pass up on it."

"I thought you told your cousin April. . ."

"Yes, of course I did, I always fob off April as a matter of principle. All the family does. In spite of that, I think we ought to get a foothold and restore the house."

"What will Sir Thomas Purfleet think about that? Are there conditions attached to the sale? I understood that he won't let the school do anything to alter Purfleet Hall."

"That's a different matter. Purfleet Hall—I was shown the principal rooms—is a very fine Georgian mansion which, except for occasional repairs and re-decoration, is in perfect condition and it would be a sin and a shame to touch it."

"I see. But you don't think Sir Thomas would object to having Little Monkshood pulled about?"

"I've spoken to him. He's all for it. He ought to be one of us. Almost the first thing he talked about was Earls Barton tower. Some people claim it was built in the ninth century. I opted for the tenth and so won his regard and esteem, and he says that once Little Monkshood is ours, we can rough-hew it how we will."

"But it doesn't look as though it *is* going to be ours."

"No, but it means that, if we can get the new owners' permission, we can carry out a restoration without let or hindrance. In fact, permission is the wrong word. They're determined that we shall do it, as you heard."

"The committee aren't going to agree to an expensive caper like that, unless the owners will agree to our rules, you know."

"You mean about opening it to the public on one or more days a week? Yes, that might be a snag. And it wouldn't be much fun doing it all up regardless, if nobody except the owner is going to benefit. What I'd really like is for my atrocious cousin to throw in her hand and leave Miss Pallis holding the baby."

"You mean that Miss Pallis might be unwilling to go it alone, and that you've got the next option on the place? Would you foreclose on the widow and the orphan? Shame on you, Timothy Herring!"

"Miss Pallis can't be a widow, and if she's an orphan she must have got over it by now. Anyway, shame on me be blowed! If young April welshes—as I'm morally certain she's bound to do, because she never sticks to a job or a project for five minutes together—Miss Pallis may be frightfully relieved to be rid of her commitments so easily."

"Sophistry, my dear Timmy, and you know it. What did you make of the lady, by the way?"

"Turned thirty, and more starry-eyed than is good for her."

"Starry-eyed? I'm not so sure. I'd like to canvass my wife's opinion on that. Idealistic, possibly, but the other sounds derogatory, and she didn't strike me as a woman whom it would be fair or proper to denigrate."

"You're right, and I apologise to the lady. Do you know, I think I'd like to look over the house again and then put this snag about the public viewing to her."

"Oh, yes, before you commit Phisbe, you'd better warn her about that, but it will do after you and Parsons have made up your minds about it, and have prepared something to put before the committee."

Timothy telephoned his cousin on the following day.

“Look over Little Monkshood again? Yes, of course. Marchmont has the keys now, because she’s put up three-quarters of the money and has guaranteed me with the bank for the rest. Yes, we had to buy it outright. The agent said that nobody on earth would give us a mortgage on it. I told you that I shall have to get this loan from the bank. I haven’t got any savings. No, I don’t want to go over the house with you. I know what a wet blanket you are, and you’d probably be very rude to me. Take Marchmont with you. Hang on to the telephone. I’ll send a girl to bring her along.”

Miss Marchmont Pallis—Timothy had noted, at their previous meeting, what a beautiful voice she had—was delighted to think that he was prepared to look over the house. She met him there on the following Wednesday at three. She had walked from the school and was already in the lane when he arrived. He apologised for being late, although the church clock had stood at only a quarter to three when he had passed it six minutes before.

“No, I’m early,” she said. “I’m free until five, so I thought I would come along immediately after school lunch. Shall we go in? I’m afraid the last people left the house—particularly the undercroft, which they seem to have converted into a kitchen and scullery—in an awful mess.”

“Yes, I’ve seen it, of course,” said Timothy. “You may be wondering why I’ve come along. I didn’t give my cousin any reason when I telephoned.”

“Well, I *hoped* you might have decided to get your Society to help us restore the place, that’s all.”

“So far as Phisbe is concerned, I’m not a free agent, you know. All I do is to sniff round any place that’s brought to our notice, or that I happen to find for myself, and then I report upon it, usually after I’ve pulled in our architect, Tom Parsons, to confirm my opinion.”

“Unofficially, I suppose?”

"Oh, strictly unofficially, although our president, the man you met the other day at my place, knows exactly what goes on."

"It sounds like the inner Cabinet. Wasn't it Mr. Parsons who designed the new church at Maghampton Marvell?"

"That's the chap."

"I'd love him to see Little Monkshood. I feel he would understand it. I wrote to Sir Thomas Purfleet, and it seems there is no objection to having it restored to its original form. Will your Society really do the work, do you suppose?"

"I can't commit Phisbe, as I say. I came down today to have a second look round, a more leisurely one, if I may. Before I tackle Parsons, let alone pass on my ideas to my committee, I must assure myself that the house is really worth the money we should have to spend on it."

"Oh, yes, of course. But—you *were* attracted by it, weren't you?"

"Very definitely so, but I distrust a hasty judgment."

"Yes, so do I." There was a pause.

"So your judgment of my cousin April wasn't hasty, I suppose," said Timothy, but to this she made no reply. She said,

"I've set my heart on this place—or, rather, on this place when it looks as it ought to look."

"Don't count your chickens, will you? You see, I had rather hoped, when I saw it first, that it would still be in the market. If it had been, I should have suggested—if, after this second inspection of it, I had felt inclined to suggest anything at all—that Phisbe buy it, do it up, and show it. As it is, I came here prepared to make you an offer for it, although I think you've paid pretty heavily for it, you know."

"I believe my headmistress, Miss Pomfret-Brown, saw to it that we did."

"Really? How was that, then?"

"Sir Thomas sold Purfleet Hall to her, you know, so when I found out that he was the owner of Little Monkshood,

I wrote to him and he wrote back to Miss Pomfret-Brown to ask—well—”

“Whether you were good for the money?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“And Miss Pomfret-Brown, anxious that two of her resident staff should not venture out into the cold, bold, naughty world, told him to stiffen up the price and freeze you out.”

“Yes. She sent for me and told me what she’d done, and it made me so angry that I agreed to his terms forthwith.”

“On the principle of ‘sucks to you,’ I suppose. Very rash and rather childish, if I may say so.”

“Well, you mayn’t! It’s no business of yours!” She flushed angrily and suddenly he saw that she was beautiful.

“I hasten to add that, in your place, I should have behaved in exactly the same way. Well, let’s go up this dark and dangerous stairway and feast our eyes on the chicken-farmer’s dream of home,” he said.

“You go. You’ll be much happier, and it’ll be more satisfactory, if you’re not cluttered up with me.”

“It may be more satisfactory, but I assure you I shan’t be happier,” said Timothy gallantly, delighted and somewhat surprised to be left to his own devices. He spent the best part of an hour in again going over the interior of the house and making rough notes of his findings. When he returned to her, it was to find Miss Pallis in the vaulted undercroft which had been turned into kitchen and scullery. She was sitting on a decrepit kitchen chair which formed part of the debris the previous tenants had left, and was reading a paper-back novel. She looked up as soon as he came in.

“Somebody has had a fire in here,” she said. “A tramp, I suppose. I wonder how he got in? Well, have you made up your mind?”

“There’s a lot to be done. I shall have to make that clear to my committee. Our treasurer, I must warn you, is a hard

and miserly man. Another thing: when Phisbe undertakes a job the size of this one, we are apt to insist that the owners be prepared to show the place.”

“Open it to the public, do you mean? Oh, but your cousin and I want to work here! It hadn’t occurred to us that there would be—well, strings tied to the thing.”

“I’m afraid you won’t get Phisbe to lift a finger unless our conditions are met. It’s only fair to tell you that.”

“In that case, perhaps we could employ our own architect and get a local builder to do the alterations. I can’t bear the idea of letting people in to tramp all over the house and quiz all our furniture and fittings, apart from the interruption to our work. We’re writing a book, you know.”

“You wouldn’t need to throw the whole house open, of course. People usually keep some of the rooms to themselves. That’s reasonable enough, and Phisbe would agree to it, I’m certain.”

“How much of it, then, would we need to show?”

“The great hall and the solar, of course, and at least part of the undercroft.”

“That means they would tramp up and down the newel staircases, doesn’t it?”

“Well, yes. If you had a complete restoration it would mean doing away with the modern ladder staircase the last tenants put in, and that would leave nothing but the two spirals. I’m afraid you’d have to show the undercroft because of the stone vaulting and the pillars. Another point: have you considered how extremely uncomfortable and inconvenient you’re going to find this place? How dark and chilly it’ll be, especially in the winter? How eerie—I don’t want to frighten you, but I must confess that to live in a place like this would give me the creeps.”

“Oh, April and I have thought it all out and considered it from every point of view, and she is just as excited about it as I am.”

“April’s geese are all swans, but only for a limited time, I’m afraid. I don’t know how well you know her, but, so far as the family are concerned, we take her young enthusiasms with a very big pinch of salt”

“Yes, I know she’s apt to take up things—and people—and then drop them, but if she got tired of Little Monkshood and—and of me, I could afford to buy her out. As it is, I shall be putting up all the money at first. It seemed better than April getting a loan from the bank.”

“You’re as keen as all that?”

“Quite as keen as all that.”

“I see.” He stood with his hands on his hips and studied the seated woman. When he had met her at his own house and had been forced to compare her with his pretty, extremely lively, and volatile cousin, he had thought her gawky, angular, and plain. Looking at her now, as she sat with her long legs stretched out, her narrow feet crossed, one fine hand negligently holding the book, the other hanging loosely down so that, from her seat in the low chair, her fingers almost brushed the stone floor, he realised that she could look graceful, that her sallow, thin, fine-boned face was sensitive and that her mouth held the promise of passion. Her remarkable eyes he had noted at his first meeting with her. Her hair—too closely cropped, he thought, to look as attractive as it might have done—was silkily smooth and formed a cap of darkness for the small and beautifully-shaped head, and this was set on a neck as slender as that of a child. He was reminded of a flower on a fragile stem, and was mildly surprised at himself for thinking in such sentimental terms.

“Well,” she said, “what’s the verdict? Have we made fools of ourselves?”

“Oh, no,” he answered. “Of course, there’s a lot to be done, but you’ve realised that. All the same”—his heart smote him as he looked at her and thought of the unpredictable irresponsible April—“if I may say so,

‘It hurts the heart to see you unafraid, Who to the bottomless future have betrayed The perilous perfection of your dust.’”

To his consternation she stood up, white-faced and furious, all her diffidence gone.

“Who—who on earth told you?” she cried. Timothy looked at her in amazement. He wondered what secret of hers he was supposed to have uncovered by his lightly-spoken quotation. She detected unerringly that he was innocent of any offence. The fire died out of her eyes. She controlled herself immediately and said, “If Gerald Gould is the order of the day, no doubt you remember how that particular poem ends. It’s strangely inconclusive:

‘Voices there are, and sudden silences . . .
And endless thoughts, and no thought in the
end
But the wind in the trees.’

“Oh, and talking of trees, that enormous old elm at the back of the house must come down. It overshadows the whole of that wing. Did you notice, when you were outside?”

“That wing will have to come down, too,” said Timothy, secretly amused and rather impressed by the adroit way in which she had contrived to change the subject. “It doesn’t belong. It’s a vandalous, scandalous addition. But I agree about the tree. It might be in a dangerous state. It could shed a mighty branch at any moment. Elms are notoriously treacherous.”

“Yes, they’re witches’ trees,” she said, lightly. She tucked her book into the leather brief-case which served her as a handbag and accompanied him on a tour of the building while he pointed out what he thought would have to be done if Phisbe agreed to undertake the alterations. Then he put her into his car and gave her tea at the mill-

house and stood hat in hand as he watched her walk up the long drive which led to the school. She had resumed her disguise. She was again a gawky, plain, blue-stocking of a woman. The ivory tower was closed, its windows shuttered against a too-intrusive sun.

He thought about her all the way home. She was an enigma, a contradiction in terms. The secret she had so nearly given away could only be a secret love-affair. That was implicit in her reaction to the quotation which he had made so light-heartedly and with such a curious result. He could not imagine her in love in the physical sense, although he realised, to his own astonishment, that a man could easily be deeply in love with her.

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci?" he wondered. No, there was nothing sinister, either about herself or what he was beginning to see as her beauty. Undine? Etain of *The Immortal Hour*? There was storm in the air, anyway. He hoped fervently that it would prove a storm in a tea-cup. April would let her down, of course, but would that be all?

CHAPTER FOUR

The Coven

"But you don't *really* know how to do it, do you?" asked Stephanie.

"Certainly I do," Sandra replied, "but it's no good unless you're a believer, and the first belief is in reincarnation."

"What's that?"

"It means that you've been on earth before."

"But how do I know I have?"

"You just have to believe it, that's all."

"Are there any others in it besides just you and me?"

"Of course there are. I've already spoken to Gillian and Caroline and I'm going to speak to Mavis."

"Have Gillian and Caroline joined?"

"Yes. We had an initiation in that empty house. Gillian thinks she was the third witch in Macbeth. We lit a fire. It was simply marvellously creepy, even in daylight. Later on we shall go there at night."

"But the Macbeth witches weren't real."

"Macbeth thought they were, and he ought to know. He's historical, isn't he?"

"What about Caroline? Who was *she*?"

"She wasn't sure, but she thinks she was the witch-mother in that ballad Miss Cummings read to us."

"What, the one who wouldn't let them have the baby?"

"That's the one."

"And what about you?"

"In a previous existence I was a witch of noble birth called Lady Alice. Also I'm the seventh child of a seventh child, so I'm bound to have the Power."

"I thought you were an only child."

"There were six born before I came. With my magic spells I murdered them."

"Oh, don't be horrid! And don't talk such awful rubbish!"

"Well, are you going to join?"

"I'll join if Mavis does."

"Well, anyway, you've taken the oath of secrecy, remember, whether you join or not, and there's an awful curse on you if you break it. Do you want me to tell you what will happen to you if you break your oath?"

"No, I don't! Anyway, I suppose I'll join. I think I was Medea."

"You couldn't have been! She was much too important to be you. I think you were Meg Merriles."

"She was a gipsy."

"A witch, too. If not, how could she have kept alive on blackberries and pods of broom? And if she'd been a *real* gipsy, she would have *sold* her mats of rushes, not just given them away to the villagers. I don't suppose they wanted them, anyway."

"Do you think they were magic spells, then?"

"I know they were, but the villagers didn't. Well, you really want to join, then?"

"All right, but I want to be a *real* witch, and I'm sure Meg Merriles wasn't."

"Well, who were you, then? Come on, if you think you know so much."

"Perhaps I was the Witch of Endor."

"Of course you weren't! Besides, I don't think we'd better take things out of the Bible—well, not yet, anyway. Do you think you were Old Mother Shipton?"

"Was she a witch?"

"Bound to be, with a name like that. All right, that's settled, then. The coven meets in the churchyard tonight around the old yew tree, and in the dark of the moon."

"After lights-out? We'll be expelled!"

"Not while I have the Power."

"Suppose it rains!"

"Oh, suppose you're a pig's grandmother! Now, repeat after me: *Floreat St. Trinian! Floreat Hecate! Floreat Diana of the Ephesians!*

"You said we mustn't use the Bible."

"All right, you can leave out 'of the Ephesians,' and then it will be all right."

The neophyte repeated the salutations and giggled.

"It's not funny," said the head of the coven loftily. "Now I'm going off to find Mavis, and you jolly well remember that you've taken the oath of secrecy, and if you break it the vultures of Satan will tear out your liver, and Odin's ravens will pick out your eyes."

"Don't be beastly!"

"Don't you forget, then!" With this, the high priestess went off to gather in the last of her flock. Old-fashioned stories about boarding schools for girls are always right about one thing. Every boarding school has one rebel who is gifted with the qualities of leadership to the extent of organising a gang which, for a time, is capable of terrorising other children and of becoming a nuisance, and sometimes a problem, to members of the school staff.

Such a child was Sandra Davidson. She was a thin, intense, red-headed little girl, aged between twelve and thirteen and, in the summer, so freckled that the freckles ran into one another and gave, at first sight, the impression that she had a brown skin which was beginning to peel. She had brought herself to the disapproving notice of the authorities at an early stage in her school career, but had been allowed to get away with a good deal until she fell foul of the junior history mistress, Timothy Herring's cousin April.

She did this by appearing in class one morning with her face completely covered in dark tan shoe polish.

April, who, as Timothy had indicated, was both young and foolish, prided herself on her wit and relished the sycophantic giggles with which it was often received. On this particular occasion she greeted the form with her usual briskness, and looked them over with good-humoured contempt. Her eyes rested upon Sandra's injudiciously decorated countenance. A crisis, she realised, was upon her.

"Oh, Celia," she said, addressing the form captain, "I see that we have a new arrival. Does Pocahontas speak English?" From those who disliked Sandra came the usual giggle of appreciation, and, encouraged by this, (for the form, as a whole, she found a difficult one), April rashly continued, "But what has happened to our little friend Cuckoo Egg? I don't seem to see her among us."

The nickname, bestowed upon Sandra in a previous lesson as a retaliation for the latter's tiresome behaviour, was, of course, unpardonable, and had April been older, wiser, kindlier, and more experienced, she would not have pushed her luck as far as she did. Sandra stood up.

"I choose to cover up my freckles, (which I can't help), to stop silly moos like you calling me damn silly names," she said, and, as promptly as she had stood up, she sat down again. The form was enthralled, and looked hopefully at April.

"Really, Sandra!" said April, white-faced.

"And you're a lousy teacher, anyway!" said Sandra, carried by the aghast yet avid expressions on the faces of her contemporaries to lengths towards which she had never intended to go. April, realising too late that she had unleashed forces beyond her control, banged the table and shouted,

"How dare you, Sandra! Go out of the room at once and report yourself to Miss Salter."

"Don't worry!" cried Sandra, now semi-hysterical. "I'm going to her to report *you*!"

"Well, wash that muck off your face first!" retorted April weakly. She sat down. The observant form noted that her hands were shaking. "Open your books at page sixty-one," she managed to say. "There will be a written test on the chapter."

An unnatural silence prevailed. April drew some papers towards her, but her eyes saw what was on them without her brain taking in a single word. Her father had threatened that if she did not keep her present job (the fifth she had taken since leaving the university two years previously) he did not intend to support her, and she was only too well aware that every junior mistress at Miss Pomfret-Brown's school was strictly on probation. Miss Pomfret-Brown was in a position to pick and choose her staff. She paid extremely well, and expected full market value for the money. Included in this was obedience to the unwritten, unspoken, but inflexible law: *Do nothing to antagonise the parents. They foot the bills.*

Sandra was brought back to the form room by Miss Salter, who, as deputy headmistress, was responsible for school discipline, to make a public apology. This she did with an ill grace and spent the rest of the lesson, to everyone's discomfort and April's apprehension, sobbing with fury. At the lesson break, April was summoned to the presence of the deputy head.

"I imagine that Sandra has told me the truth, Miss Bounty, but I should be interested to have your account of what took place."

"Do I have to justify myself, Miss Salter? Is that what you mean?" April attempted bluster. It did not work.

"There is no occasion to take that line, Miss Bounty. Surely you realise that witticisms made at the expense of sensitive children are both unkind and out of place?"

"I only intended a joke."

"That is what I mean. Did you not anticipate the effect that a comment upon her personal appearance would have upon a child such as Sandra Davidson?"

"Well, she came into class with shoe-polish on her face. It was done on purpose to annoy me and—and to undermine my authority."

"You seem to have been instrumental in doing that yourself, do you not? Your methods might work in a State School, although I very much doubt it, but they are entirely out of place here."

"The girl was extremely insolent, Miss Salter."

For which she has been made to apologise. Very well, Miss Bounty. That will do. I think we understand one another, do we not?"

April went to the Staff Common Room and raged to Vere Pallis, the only member of staff who happened to have a free period.

"Well," said the latter, when the tirade was over and April was blinking away tears of frustrated fury, "I don't know what you expected. This is a good school in most ways and, of course, it's got to keep up its reputation if it's to continue to flourish. But how long do you suppose it would flourish if parents took their daughters away because the junior staff used them as stooges for their sense of fun?"

"So *you're* against me, too!" cried April, indignant but not surprised. "I *did* think, being Marchmont's half-sister . . ."

"Oh, no, you didn't," said the cold-eyed woman at the table, "and, if Alison had listened to *my* advice—"

"Very kind of you to offer any! Considering all the circumstances—"

"Really, Miss Bounty, you are hardly keeping to the point."

"No? Do you think I don't realise how things are between Marchmont and Simon Bennison? Yes, and between you and Simon Bennison, too! I'm not surprised you don't

want her to buy a house where she can meet him as often as she pleases, without always having *you* snooping around! What's more—"

"Miss Bounty," said Vere Pallis, turning upon the rash and reckless April those cold and frightening eyes which were so unlike those of her half-sister, "will you please stop showing off like a jealous, bad-mannered child of ten? I should be glad to get on with my marking. If you had a little more consideration for other people, including the children, you would not now be in this ridiculously hysterical condition."

A few hundred yards from the scene of this emotional disagreement, Sandra Davidson was holding court over close personal friends and loyal followers.

"So I'm going to do something about it," she said, at the end of a long exposition, "and you two and Gillian have got to help me. I'll get Mavis to join, and then we shall need a postulant."

"A what?"

"You know—a sort of tenderfoot—somebody who will be lower than us, so that we can boss her about and frighten her, and make her do the things we don't want to do."

"Who could it be?"

"I don't know yet. I've got to get Mavis first, and Gillian's so big headed, but we've got to have her."

"Why can't it just be the three of us?"

"Because there are too many things to be got, so we *must* have help. If I knew of anybody else we could trust, I'd ask her as well. That would make seven, with the postulant, and seven is one of the sacred numbers."

"Like three?"

"Yes, but don't keep on about three. We've got to have more, I tell you!"

"I wasn't keeping on. Is thirteen a sacred number?"

"Not in an initiation. When they initiate witches they hit them with a stick or a lash or something, and the strokes are

three . . .”

“See? That’s what I . . .”

“Seven, nine and twenty-one.”

“Nobody’s going to hit *me!*” said Stephanie firmly.

“They’ll get a bash over the head with a rounders stick if they do!”

“That’s all right. Very few covens do it nowadays—hit the postulant, I mean.”

“Oh, I don’t mind about *her*,” said Caroline, the third member of the coven. “Why don’t you choose Veronica? She’s always trying to suck up to us and hang around, and she’s a poisonous reptile, anyway. She wouldn’t show me her translation of that beastly French poem Miss Cuttler set us last week, and Sally Watts had to absolutely *grab* her algebra answers from her yesterday to get a look at Exercise Five. Veronica absolutely stinks!”

“Veronica?” said Sandra thoughtfully. “She’d do anything to be allowed to come in with us. I’ll think her over. But first we’ve got to collect the things we shall need, and then I’ll show you how to draw the magic circle. We’ll do it in that empty farmhouse where we went before.”

Stephanie, as aforesaid, had been only reluctantly prepared to join the coven, but Mavis, a dark, fat, rather stupid child whose value to the gang was a monetary one—she was well-supplied by over-indulgent parents and was ready and willing to buy the friends she might not otherwise have made—embraced the idea of becoming a witch with shudderingly agreeable delight.

“You ought to ask Deirdre,” she said.

“Deirdre?” The chief witch pursed her lips. “She babbles. Don’t you remember . . .”

“What about Connie Moosedeer?” suggested Caroline. “She’s half Red Indian, and they will always let themselves be burnt at the stake before they’ll tell any secrets.”

“They’re superstitious, though, aren’t they?” asked Mavis. “Don’t you remember the fussation there was last

term when Gloire-Marie Deschamps went to Miss Salter and asked her to stop Penny Docherty telling ghost-stories in their dorm, after lights-out?"

"Yes, but Gloire-Marie is a West Indian. That's not a bit the same as a *Red* Indian," retorted Sandra. "All right, I'll swear Connie to secrecy and then I'll sound her. With Veronica, that will make up the seven we want. And when we've finished with April Fool, she'll be sorry she was haha funny about me in class. Fancy *me* having to apologise to *her*, after what she called me!"

"I think she ought to be sacked," said the loyal Caroline.

"Not until we've given her the full treatment," said the vengeful Sandra. "We've got a fortnight before the end of term, so we'll think up something really beastly. Getting her sacked is only a beginning."

In spite of April's apprehensions, Miss Pomfret-Brown, briefed in confidential chat with her chief-of-staff, was not an unreasonable woman. She realised (perhaps not fully, but certainly in part) the difficulties faced by the younger members of her staff, and although she did not condone April's ill-considered jests at the expense of children she did not like, she also had a certain amount of sympathy with the young teacher's task of maintaining law and order. Nevertheless, although Miss Salter informed her, to her satisfaction, that she had taken that little nuisance Sandra Davidson back to the classroom and had caused her to apologise in front of the rest of the form, she felt doubtful about the ethics of this proceeding. She advised Miss Salter to keep a finger on the pulse of both combatants for the rest of the term. The child, in her view, had not been altogether in the wrong.

As matters turned out, Sandra and her coterie behaved for some time with exemplary discretion, so much so that April, who, as her relatives and close friends knew to their cost, was no psychologist, was inclined to refer, in airy tones, to the apparently incontrovertible fact that she had

“got the better of those little horrors in Middle Three,” having shown them, once and for all, that she could hold her own and would stand no nonsense.

“Well, of course, Miss Salter put the fear of God into Sandra Davidson,” commented an outspoken contemporary, “so Sandra and her gang will naturally lie low for a bit. You might sling over Lower Two’s reports if you’ve finished libelling the dear children. I’ve got something to say about one or two of them.”

“Little headaches!” put in a loyal friend.

“I think Sandra Davidson is playing Brer Possum,” said another young teacher. “I don’t suppose she cared much about being made to apologise to you, April. After all, you *did* ask for lip. Personally, I think it’s a bit cheap to give the children nicknames. They don’t really like it.”

“If one can’t treat a child of that age to a bit of chaff,” began April.

“Do you mind?” asked a peevish senior member of staff who was trying to correct Remove algebra papers. “I should *rather* like to get these done before tea.”

Her juniors subsided. A quarter of an hour later Marchmont Pallis came in. April caught her eye and made a gesture towards the door. Marchmont nodded and settled herself and her examination papers at a table. The silence continued for another five minutes, then April yawned, pushed aside her work and left the common room. Ten minutes later Marchmont joined her in the library which, at that time in the afternoon, was deserted while the school was out riding or at tennis and rounders.

“What is it?” she asked. “I’ve an awful lot to do.”

“I know. So have I. Marchmont, I’m terribly sorry, but I’ve said something to Vere I ought not to have said.”

“Why?”

“It was all because of that loathsome little Sandra Davidson. One of these days I shall murder the brat. She’s insufferable.”

"From what I hear, you were rather insufferable yourself."

"I've got the better of her, anyway."

"I'm glad you think so."

"I—I'd better tell you what I said to Vere."

"Does it matter? She is well able to take care of herself."

"It isn't that. I mean, I know she is. You see, I—well, I didn't mean to, but I brought you into it."

"Did you?"

"Oh, Marchmont, you're not being very understanding."

"What is there to understand?"

"That—that—well, without thinking what I was saying, I mentioned her and you and—well—Simon Bennison."

"Oh, *did* you?"

"And—and—look, Alison—Marchmont, I mean—I don't think I want to go shares in Little Monkshood, after all. I mean, I know I can't afford it, and it will be rather a tie, and I believe Miss Pomfret-Brown intends to kick me out, and, well—if you see what I mean."

"Perfectly. You don't want to live with me at Little Monkshood."

"I'm terribly sorry. I've—I've just changed my mind. I really am sorry."

"Not at all."

"Shall you—shall you still go ahead with it?"

"Naturally."

"I didn't mean—I mean, I didn't think . . ."

"No, you never do, do you? Well, if that's all, I'll go back to the common-room and finish my reports."

"Don't go yet. I—are we still friends?"

"Must you be childish?"

"You'll be better off at Little Monkshood without me, I expect."

"Opinions sometimes differ, but on this occasion they do not."

"I'm sorry if you're hurt. I didn't mean . . ."

"So what we want," said Sandra, at the same moment as these remarks were being concluded, "are these things. Have you all got a pencil, as I told you? All right. Put these down, and then you can tick off the ones you think you can get. Ready? And don't ask me to spell anything. Spelling doesn't matter, so long as you know what it is."

The list was a long one. It included such items as salt, a censer, a black-handled knife, a white-handled knife, an awl, candles, a sword, a brass water-sprinkler, garters, a table, chalk, charcoal, some cord (preferably white), and some incense.

"We can never get all these things," protested Caroline.

"Besides all those," pursued the chief witch, ignoring this puerile plea, "I want you to get some herbs. We only need nine . . ."

"There aren't *nine* herbs!" said Stephanie. "There can't be!"

"I shall give you a list of—let's see—yes, I've put down fifteen, so if you can't get some, there's others which will do. Ready? Musk, bergamot, rosemary, basil, tansy, rue, fennel, dill, camomile, mint, sage, thyme, orris root, wormwood, veronica—"

"I've never even *heard* of half of them!" wailed Mavis.

"It's up to all of you," said the leader. "We only need nine, and you've got fifteen to choose from. It ought to be simple."

"What's bergamot?"

"What's tansy?"

"I thought dill was something you gave babies."

"Of course it isn't, silly! It's American pickles."

"What's fennel?"

"I thought musk was some sort of an ox."

"It's used in scent, silly!"

"That's skunk."

"My nurse used to give us camomile tea. It was absolutely beastly!"

"Wormwood? Ugh!"

"Oh, shut up, the lot of you! Don't natter. We haven't time!" said Sandra impatiently.

"What about cloves?" asked Gillian.

"Cloves are spices, like nutmeg and ginger and things. You know—pepper and all that," said Sandra. She looked at the only member of the group who had not spoken. "Will you be able to get any of the things we want, Connie?"

"Oh, yes, of course," said the Canadian Indian, with great composure. "When do you want them?"

"Well, you can collect them at any time, and then I'll let you know. We've got to go to a meeting-place where we won't be disturbed."

"You didn't mean it about the churchyard, then," said Stephanie, greatly relieved.

"I don't believe modern witches meet anywhere except inside a house, unless they're doing the Black Mass," said Gillian, "and then I suppose it would have to be a church. And I don't believe orris root is a herb, any more than cloves, so there!"

"Witches don't do the Black Mass," said the chief witch. "That's the Satanists. We don't want to do any of the things *they* do."

"Like not saying things out of the Bible?" asked Stephanie.

"Yes, that's right. Anyway, we couldn't meet in the churchyard in the daytime, and it's too beastly at night. We'll go where we went before, to that old empty house. It's ever so good. The next thing is about Veronica. She's willing to be our postulant, so first I'll show you how to draw the magic circle, and then I'll tell you the ritual, because it's got to be done right, or else the spell won't work."

"What spell?" enquired Mavis. The leader lowered her voice to tones of sepulchral significance.

“The spell that means death and destruction to rotten old April Fool,” she murmured. “Floreat St. Trinian! Floreat Hecate! Floreat Diana of the . . . Oh, no! Floreat Diana, although it doesn’t sound half so good! Now you all say it. Come on!”

The coven responded. Somewhere in the house a bell rang.

“That’s prep.,” said Mavis. “Couldn’t we make a spell to mean death and destruction to prep.?”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Incoming Tenant

"We might take a picnic lunch if the weather is fine," said Diana Parsons.

"But the village has quite a good restaurant, likewise a very pleasant pub," said Timothy, who, like many men, detested picnics unless there was no other way of obtaining a meal.

"Oh, no, I love picnics. It's so nice to eat in the open air," said Diana, putting the usual mistaken feminine view. "Tom likes them, too, don't you, darling?"

"Oh, yes, I love the company of wasps and ants and the salad-dressing mixing itself up in the fruit salad. Delicious," said her husband.

"Will there be champagne?" asked Timothy.

"Let's say a couple of bottles of hock."

"*And* a corkscrew? Anyhow, be that as it may, I thought, if you didn't mind, I'd find out whether the prospective owner would care to join us. She ought to hear what Tom has to say about Little Monkshood."

"What about your cousin April? Isn't she mixed up in all this?" asked Parsons.

"Not now. She wrote to say that she has opted out. Her excuse is that she hasn't the money. My own impression is that she and the other party have had a row. End of term, nerves on edge, tempers short, everybody ready to take umbrage at the drop of a hat—that kind of thing. You know what women are!"

"That is a most unmannerly remark, Tim, dear," protested Diana.

"I apologise. I took it for granted that present company was excepted. Anyway, I'm glad the unspeakable little April is out of it. I couldn't bear the stigma of nepotism."

"You've made up your mind to approach the committee, then?"

"I haven't been so keen on anything since we did up Peakstone, in Derbyshire. Is it all right, then, if I ask Miss Pallis to join us? I'd like her to get the gen at first hand. I think you'll find her an intelligent sort of person, Tom. You won't have to stick to words of one syllable. She'll know what you're talking about."

"I can't wait to see Little Monkshood," said Diana. "It isn't often Tim gets all excited to this extent. I suppose," she went on, eyeing him, "it *is* the house, and not the owner, which is responsible for all the boyish enthusiasm?"

"The owner is a maiden lady of uncertain age, ma'am. She is what my cousin unkindly describes as the prototype of unwanted spinster."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Diana.

"There's no such animal nowadays," said her husband. "Those who aren't bespoke are volunteers for celibacy, and maybe are not all that celibate, anyway. What you mean is that, so far as you are concerned, she is elderly, ugly, and uninteresting."

"Oh, well, you'll see," said Timothy, surprised by the vehemence with which his mind rejected this description of Marchmont Pallis, in spite of what he himself had said of her.

"I wonder whether it will be embarrassing to her on the financial side, now that your cousin isn't going into partnership," said Diana. "What did Little Monkshood go for? Do you know?"

"More than I would have paid for it in its present condition, but there's some land attached to it and it's a biggish house as it stands at present, although at the back

of it there's a nasty Victorian addition which will have to be scrapped. The sale was to Miss Pallis, anyway. April would have had to touch the bank for her share, having failed to extract it from me, unless Miss Pallis had subbed up."

Marchmont Pallis answered Diana's invitation by return of post, and, having been asked to name the date most convenient to her, suggested the following Saturday afternoon at three, and promised to get Little Monkshood clean and tidy beforehand. Tom and Diana were to spend the week-end with Timothy, so the picnic was held at one o'clock on the way down, and at three o'clock Marchmont Pallis met them at the broken gate which led to the smallholding and the farmhouse. Parsons and Miss Pallis went into the house, while Timothy and Diana remained in their deckchairs beside the car.

"Didn't you want to go with them and take a look inside?" asked Timothy.

"Oh, I don't intend to stand first on one leg and then on the other, and listen to Tom being technical. You can take me round when they've finished, and tell me in words of one syllable what it's all about. You explain things so beautifully, and you're so nice and brisk about it."

"One does one's best to please a goddess, and I offer Ben Jonson's prayer to Diana every time I look at you."

"What lovely things you say! That's because you're a bachelor. Married men never pay compliments—at least, never to their wives."

"Sometimes when I say lovely things I hit a bullseye I didn't even know was there, and that can be extremely disconcerting."

"You're talking about Miss Pallis. When did you hit the bullseye?"

"When, in my innocence and ignorance, and desiring only to please, I quoted a bit of Gerald Gould at her. It was intended as an Elizabethan-type compliment—you know,

utterly insincere—so I suppose I deserved what I got. Anyway, it came back at me like a boomerang.”

“She’s a hidden volcano, of course. You can’t mistake the type, if it *is* a type. What did you uncover—a secret love-affair?”

“I almost think I must have done. She gave herself away pretty badly. A sudden shock, I fancy, but she very cleverly capped the quotation and adroitly changed the subject.”

“You know, Tim dear, you might do worse.”

“You horrify me! Can’t women ever keep themselves from match-making? You’ve no idea how repulsive it is!”

“Anyway, I shall pray to Saint Anthony for her. You’d better join me.”

“Not here and now. Let’s get the debris out of the car and go down to that little stream we crossed, and while you dabble the crockery, and I dry it, I will sing you songs of Arcady.”

“Araby.”

“Pardon me, *not* Araby, and you can also keep fair Kashmir. I said, and I meant, Arcady.”

“I don’t know that I’m flattered. Weren’t the Arcadians simple shepherds, and rather despised by the intellectuals?”

“Ah, but the songs will be mine, not yours, so, fair Juvenal, despise me not, even though ‘the country of Chastellerand abounds with Arcadian nightingales.’ Rabelais.”

“Never mind him. Tell me more about you and Marchmont Pallis. Why Marchmont?”

“Because she has a half-sister at the school, so one is known as Miss Marchmont Pallis and the other as Miss Vere Pallis.”

“How aristocratic! Why did I have to marry a man named Parsons? But surely she’s got a first name which isn’t quite so high-sounding?”

“Alison, I believe. I am almost certain that April mentioned the name Alison. It was Miss Salter who told me

they were only half-sisters. I'm glad. I didn't much take to Vere."

"Alison Herring? . . . no, perhaps not. Well, come along with those crocks and let's wash them romantically all among the weeds and watercresses. You can take off your shoes and socks and roll up your trousers. You like paddling, don't you?"

"Not as much as you do. Besides, you've such lovely legs. I shall adore seeing you put on your stockings after I've dried your delicate feet on a handkerchief which, thereafter, will never leave my heart."

"You won't get the chance. I'm not going to risk treading on a newt. *You* can do the wading, if any."

Diana was right about her husband's long windedness. She and Timothy had washed up the plates and glasses and had been seated in the deckchairs for the best part of an hour before the other two came out of the farmhouse to find Diana knitting and Timothy ungallantly asleep. Diana prodded him with a knitting needle as the other two approached.

"They're back," she said. "Now it's our turn. Do sit down, Miss Pallis. You must be worn out. Tom always gets carried away, if I'm not there to stop him talking."

"It's been fascinating," said Marchmont, taking the chair which Timothy had vacated, "but there's a terrifying amount to be done."

"Come and show me, Tim," said Diana, holding out her hands to be pulled up from her deckchair. Tom Parsons seated himself when his wife had taken Timothy into the house, filled a pipe, lit it and, having smoked in silence for a few minutes, took the pipe from his mouth and studied his companion. She was lying back in the deckchair with her eyes closed, and he noted not only the length of her dark eyelashes, but the shadows under the eyes and the hollow cheekbones in the sallow face.

As though she had become conscious that he was gazing at her, Marchmont opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"Old Tim," said Parsons, "is a very good sort of chap. I know he'll do his best for you with our committee, and I'll back him up. He tells me you've probably got another friend at court, too. Do you know Lady Grace Norton?"

"I've heard of her. Doesn't she run one of the Oxfam things?"

"Yes, full of good works, and also one of our keenest members. Tim has found out that she visited this place several years ago and tried to interest the tenants in getting it properly restored, but they wouldn't be bothered. Probably preferred it as it is. I think it might be a very good idea to bring her down to have another look at it before Tim sees the committee about it next month. She's got a lot of influence with the big shots. When does your vacation begin?"

"The week after next. School breaks up on Thursday, but I shall stay on for a few days. I've a lot of odd jobs to do, and after I've cleared them out of the way I'm going to Greece. The best plan would be for me to hand you over the keys of this place. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you and Mr. Herring for giving up your time like this, especially now that his cousin is no longer interested."

"Oh, really, there's no need for gratitude. Tim loves to stick his oar in and, as for me, it's just part of my job to come along and look at places he thinks Phisbe would like. By the way—I did mention it while we were in the house—I suppose you do realise that, by the time we've finished the job, you'll only be able to use that vaulted undercroft as a cellar and general storehouse? I mean, we shall rip out all the present fittings."

"Oh, I shall have plenty of junk to put in it, I expect, and I did understand when you explained."

“And that when we’ve taken down those party walls on the first floor you’ll have a room forty feet long and sixteen wide?”

“Yes, but I shall only use that if I give a party. I shall furnish it hardly at all—just a refectory table and some benches along the wall, I thought. The solar will be my living-room and the second chamber my bedroom. Must I really put them on show?”

“Phisbe will have to go into a huddle with you about that, and, if I were you, I’d keep the second chamber strictly to myself, but you might have to agree to show the undercroft, the solar, and the great hall. Phisbe is pretty reasonable, you’ll find, and, if you stick to your guns, I’m sure you’ll get your own way.”

“I almost wish I’d agreed to pay for the reconstruction myself. I still hate the idea of opening the house to strangers who’ve paid for admission.”

“Yes, of course you do, but there’s no help for that, I’m afraid. Still, as I say, you can call the tune to some extent. Phisbe will always meet the owner at least halfway, and I’ll back you up all I can, and so will Tim, and it won’t cost you anything but a token payment for absolutely expert work.”

Inside the farmhouse Timothy was engaged in the pleasant task of apprising Diana Parsons of the alterations which he hoped would take place.

“Although,” he said, when he had finished his explanations, “what Miss Alison Marchmont Pallis wants with a house of this kind passes my comprehension. By the time we’ve finished with it, she might as well be living in Tutankhamen’s tomb. No electric light, no gas, no water except from the well—I can’t see that any woman on her own will be able to stick it. Do you think she realises what she’s in for? You see, if Phisbe foots the bill, we shall make a proper job of it and with no half-measures. By the time Tom’s finished with it, it will be a place that very few people could bear to live in.”

“Well, apparently people in the thirteenth century could bear to live in it. Of course I realise that their standards wouldn’t be quite the same as ours.”

“Besides that, you see, they probably had large families and, in a house of this type, servants. It’s the fact that, now April has thrown in her hand, Miss Pallis will be living here alone that worries me.”

“She may not intend to live alone, Tim dear. If you ask me, there’s a man involved. Your boomerang proves that, I should say. I wouldn’t be surprised if your cousin was only brought in as a sort of smoke-screen.”

“I wouldn’t know about that. Anyway, Miss Pallis will have to employ at least a charwoman. She couldn’t manage a place this size *and* teach *and* write this book they talked about, without some kind of domestic help. Then there’s the question of food. How is she going to cook after we’ve ripped out that kitchen range in the undercroft?”

“I shouldn’t think food will be much of a problem for her, you know, except at week-ends. She is certain to have a midday meal at school five days a week, and her tea as well. I expect. Otherwise she’ll eat out. Didn’t you say there was a perfectly good restaurant at the mill-house? Any snacks, or an egg-and-bacon breakfast, she can cook on one of those cartridge picnic stoves, likewise make tea and coffee. Much more important, to my mind, is the question of artificial light. She won’t want to ruin her eyesight trying to read by candle-light or with an oil lamp, and I don’t suppose you’ll allow her to have the place wired for electricity.”

“She can have wall-lighting in the great hall to look like torches, I suppose, and there’s no reason why she shouldn’t have an electric reading-lamp in the solar. Modern wiring can be inconspicuous.”

“She’ll also need the telephone and the radio and a television set and a record player, and I expect she’ll want electric fires and night-storage heaters, so it’s a good thing

you're not going to cut her off from the modern world entirely."

"I must talk to Tom about it, but first things first. The committee will have to be tackled about the general restoration before we go into details. I think my best plan will be to write to Lady Grace Norton, so that we've got a friend at court before we bring the rest of the members into it. If Coningsby is right—and he always is—he'll be on our side, I should think. Well, shall we join the others?"

Marchmont was reading. Tom, who had finished his pipe, was painstakingly undoing his wife's knitting to where he had spotted a fault.

"We've been discussing ways and means of living in a thirteenth-century house," said Diana. "Oh, have I done my knitting wrong? Yes, I can see I have. Tim and I have been going deeply into questions of lighting and cooking. Had you thought about that sort of thing, Miss Pallis? That's it, darling. Now will you pick up the stitches for me? You knit much better than I do."

"The house will be wired for electricity, of course," said Parsons, doing as his wife suggested. "There you are, my dear. There's nothing to stop Miss Pallis from having electric light and electric fires laid on. It need not spoil the look of the place if we have it done discreetly. I can't see any reason why she shouldn't be comfortable."

"He's human, after all, you see," said Diana to Marchmont.

"The only problem is to get the committee to agree to all this," went on Parsons. "They can't be expected to pay for the wiring or any of the electric fittings, of course," he added, turning to Marchmont, who had closed her book and straightened up, "but I'm afraid they'll want their say."

"Oh, yes, of course," she said. "I'll be glad of their advice. I may get an offer of help from somebody who loves old houses and has taken a great deal of interest in this one."

"More interest than young April showed, apparently," said Timothy, meeting Diana's eyes and receiving a glance which said, I told you so."

"Well, that's fine," said Parsons. "Another thing: we might be able to persuade Phisbe to agree to confine the cash customers to, say, June, July, and August, when you'd be on holiday some of the time. Phisbe could put a caretaker in charge while you were away, and that way you would hardly have any bother at all. When's the next committee meeting, Tim? I think I'd better come along."

"It's quite on the cards that the committee would like to talk to you, too, Miss Pallis," said Timothy. "We meet next Tuesday, at three. Could you manage that?"

"Yes, if they want to see me. It will be in the middle of the tennis tournament, so I can easily ask for leave. I'm not a bit good at interviews, though. Would it be all right if I brought my friend to do most of the talking?"

"Of course it will be all right," said Timothy. "Bring along anyone you like. We've had whole families, not to mention a complete Cathedral Chapter, at our meetings before now."

They dropped Marchmont at the school gates after having had tea at the mill. Parsons then observed: "That woman is a dark horse and a *femme fatale*."

"So you noticed it, too," said Timothy. I lit on it by accident, but once I'd spotted it I couldn't think why it hadn't hit me in the eye first go off."

"It didn't, because at first I expect she was nervous and shy, so you thought her gawky, plain, spinsterish, donnish, and beginning to look middle-aged," said Diana. I wonder what the so-called friend is like?"

"A shambling, ugly, old-maidish, pedantic, even more donnish, and *really* middle-aged woman," said Tom Parsons, "so to hell with your ideas of romance! It's probably her headmistress."

"Nonsense! It's a man, and he's married, and he and Miss Pallis—surely *he* doesn't call her Marchmont?—are

tangled up in a hopeless love-affair which has gone on ever since she was a student and he was a junior lecturer at her university," said Diana. "He's got a wife in a mental hospital, or in a home for inebriates, or with an incurable illness or something, and either can't get a divorce or hasn't the heart to ask for one."

"Write it up in novelette form, and sell it on the railway bookstalls," suggested her husband. "It's been written a million times before, but what of that? It still makes money."

"You may jibe, but, after all, who called her a dark horse and a *femme fatale*?" retorted his wife.

"I didn't give her a romantic love-affair. That was your contribution. I only meant that she smoulders."

"And to think I left you alone with her inside that house all that time!"

"While you went off with the glamorous lad who is now sitting beside you! Yes, we should both have known better. Will you sue for a divorce, or shall I?"

"I fancy it's a man," said Timothy. "If it's a woman, I think she'd have mentioned her name. And it obviously isn't her sister, or surely she'd have said so."

"A dark horse," repeated Diana thoughtfully. "A coltpixie, perhaps."

"What on earth is a coltpixie?" demanded Timothy.

"A sort of devil-horse which lures real horses into swamps and so destroys them."

"So you be careful, my lad," said Tom Parsons. "She sounds (wait for the pun) a nightmare to me."

"That's silly!" said Diana. "She isn't in the least frightening. I should think she has all her fights inside herself, that's all."

CHAPTER SIX

Phisbe Commits Itself

The formal business of the committee over—the president never wasted much time—the members settled down to enjoy themselves. Rumour had gone round that there was an attractive proposition coming up for discussion and they proposed to make the most of it. The president's introduction, after the settlement of Other Business, seldom varied. "Got anything for us, Tim?"

"Yes," replied Timothy, rising. "A year or two ago Lady Grace Norton," he bowed to her, "spotted a thirteenth-century farmhouse in Dorset which had been sadly Victorianised. The people allowed her to inspect it, but were not interested in her suggestion that it ought to be restored. She sent us in a memo, but there was nothing we could do about it at that time. The tenants were satisfied with the place and were determined not to be disturbed. Since then, however, they have left, and the place has come up for sale. It has found a purchaser who is ready and willing to let us have a go. I have copies of plans and elevations, showing what could be done, and some photographs of what the house looks like at present. I don't know whether you'd care to pass them round, and then we can discuss them and find out members' views."

The sheets were passed round. The faithful and industrious Coningsby had provided a dozen copies. There was an interested and respectful silence as members

studied the plans and photographs. The treasurer was the first to speak.

"What's it going to cost?" he asked, as treasurers must. "Not a lot," replied Parsons. "I can't quote figures yet, but the fabric is pretty sound. Most of the work will be that of demolition. As you can see, that will involve a general throwing out of extraneous ceilings and party walls. It remains to be seen what will have to be done to the roof when the ceilings come down, but I've been up into the loft and had a look at the timbers. Some will need replacement, but it's by no means a wholesale job, because the previous tenants have looked after the roof particularly well."

"How did Mr. Herring come to find the place?" asked the woman member at whose suggestion Timothy had first gone to Monkshood Mill.

"By chance, really," said Timothy. "The mill was no good to us, so, after I had looked it over, I was fortunate enough to be shown over the very fine Georgian house which you must have noticed when you were there."

"Oh, yes, I stayed there as the guest of the Purfleets. Years ago, of course. I don't really know what put the mill into my mind all that time afterwards, but I'm very glad you went, if it led you to this most exciting house."

"You approve of the suggestion that we should do up Little Monkshood, then, Mrs. Miles?" asked the president.

"Oh, yes, of course! But Mr. Herring was going to tell us . . ."

"Yes," said Timothy. "Well, both at the house, which is now a school, and at the church, which I also visited, I was recommended to go and look at Little Monkshood. I realised that it had possibilities for us, so much so that I would have suggested we buy it. However, we have been forestalled over that, but the new owner is prepared to let us do what we like with it before she takes up residence, provided that we get to work promptly, as, of course, she wants to live in it as soon as possible."

"I suppose she knows that she will be obliged to open it to the public if we do the work?" said a crusty member.

"Yes, that has been pointed out to her."

"And she doesn't regard that as an obstacle?"

"I think we had better put it to her officially," said the treasurer. "We don't want there to be any misunderstanding. Our rules are quite clear and must be adhered to. When can we contact the lady?"

"She is waiting in the ante-chamber. I thought you might like to talk to her, so I asked her to come along."

"Before we have her in," said an elderly member, "I wonder whether you'd mind explaining exactly what you have in mind to do to the house? These plans and things are all very well, but I don't get much idea from them as to what you really intend."

"Parsons?" said the president, looking at Tom expectantly.

"Yes, certainly," said Tom, getting up from his seat at the foot of the table. "Tim dates the house as from 1260 to 1280. Originally it consisted of a vaulted undercroft with a central row of pillars, and, above this, a hall, and a solar. There is also a fine second chamber. The last was added in the fourteenth century and I think we should retain it.

"An outside stone staircase, still in good repair, leads up to this floor, and internal newel staircases lead down from the hall, the original kitchen (from which the screens have disappeared, so at present it is incorporated with the hall), the solar and the second chamber, to the undercroft which, at present, is in use as a farmhouse kitchen—or *was*, before the tenants left.

"Party walls have been erected to divide up the rooms, and will have to come down, as will the lath and plaster ceilings which at present hide the very fine timberings of the roof. The undercroft houses a large kitchen range and other appurtenances which will have to be discarded, and I really think we ought to replace the present roofing slates.

They are sound enough, but, if left, they would spoil the character of the rest of the house. Still, that, of course, could come later.

"There are some nineteenth-century windows which will have to go, and so will a nineteenth-century wing which you will see in the photographs. I think, however, that it would be in order to retain the two very fine sixteenth-century windows in the hall and solar. For one thing, without them the house would be depressingly dark, and, for another, the new owner wants to keep them."

"Thank you," said the elderly member. "Well, shall we have the lady in, Mr. President?"

Marchmont, after all, had come alone. Timothy wondered why, and also what impression she would make on the committee. He went into the ante-room to get her.

"Come along, Daniel," he said. "I am sent to guarantee that the lions won't eat you."

"Have you any idea what they think?"

"The atmosphere seems favourable. I can usually tell." He escorted her into the committee room and Parsons gave her his chair so that she sat at the foot of the table where everybody could see her. If she felt nervous she did not show it. Parsons found himself another chair and set it down beside her.

"It is extremely kind of you to come so far," said the president. "We are always glad to see the interested party or parties before we undertake the work they want us to do. Are you prepared to answer questions?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. I expected them." There was no doubting the quality of her voice, thought Timothy.

"When do you expect to take possession—to move into this house?"

"At the end of the third week in September, if that is possible. I should like to move in before I go back to school."

"Parsons?"

"Oh, yes," said Tom. "I should think that might be possible. I should have to see our contractors, of course, but that gives us two weeks of July, the whole of August and three weeks in September. As I see it, our best plan is to begin at the top and work downwards. We couldn't possibly finish the whole job in that time, of course, but we could make the main rooms habitable, and then Miss Pallis would have to put up with a bit of inconvenience while we finished."

"I should be out all day on five days a week," said Marchmont. "Do I understand, then, that the Society is prepared to undertake the restoration?"

"I haven't put it to the vote yet," said the president mildly.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Not at all. Are there any more questions?"

"Yes," said the crusty member. "You do realise, madam, that if we restore your house you will be obliged to open it to the public? That is one of our strictest rules, you know."

"Yes, I have been told that. How often would it be necessary?"

"Once a week is our minimum," said the treasurer. "Twice a week during the summer months is more usual."

"And the summer months would include . . .?"

"May, June, July, August, and September. Then there would be Easter Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, and the other two Monday holidays."

Marchmont stood up.

"I'm very sorry," she said, "but I can't agree to all that."

"Plenty of people open their homes a great deal more often than has been suggested to you, madam," said the crusty member. "Some open them all the year round."

"Yes, I'm sure they do, but their houses are very much larger than mine, so that they still have some privacy."

"Just a minute," said the president, interposing before the crusty member could continue. "You *would* be prepared

to open the house to the public, Miss Pallis, I take it, if we could agree upon the details?"

"No, I don't think I would. The conditions are too severe. After all, the house is my property."

"In that case," began the treasurer.

"Suppose," said the president persuasively—he had, as usual, been briefed previously by Timothy—"we made it one day a week in the months of June, July, and August, and arranged for a curator to be in charge that day, so that you wouldn't be bothered with that side of it at all?"

"Well"—her eyes sought those of Timothy—"would I have to show the whole house?"

"I suggest," said Timothy, "that the undercroft, the kitchen and buttery (when we have re-established them), and the great hall should be shown, and that the solar and the second chamber should remain private. It is only reasonable to keep the public out of Miss Pallis's bedroom and sitting-room, don't you think?"

"We could ask only a very moderate fee for viewing, then," said the treasurer gloomily. "People would expect a good deal more than that for half-a-crown."

"One shilling for admission and a leaflet given free," said Lady Grace Norton firmly. "Members of the Society and their families to be admitted free on presentation of membership card. It's not as though we need the money, but we do need to do up Little Monkshood."

"We don't have membership cards," snarled the crusty member. "This isn't a demnition trade union!"

"My *dear* Mr. Cholley!" retorted Lady Grace. "What is to prevent our excellent young Mr. Coningsby getting cards printed? Now, Miss Er . . . what do you say? Let us have the full proposition from Timothy Herring who, I can see, is determined, as always, to have his own way. What is more, I intend to have mine, and if you're all going to make such a fuss I shall put up the money myself for the restoration, and then I'm hanged if Miss Pallis and I will let any one of you

put his nose inside the place! That house is a gem—a *gem*, do you hear?—and I’m not going to let it go to waste.”

“Lady Grace, I kiss your hand,” said Timothy, when the meeting was over and full agreement had been reached.

“Go and kiss that young woman,” retorted the dowager. “By the look of her, she can do with a bit of pettin’.”

Timothy found Marchmont waiting for him in the hall.

“Well,” he said, cheerfully, “that’s that.”

“I’m very grateful,” she said.

“What time do you have to be back?”

“It doesn’t really matter.” She smiled. “I’m senior staff. We’re trusted not to behave ourselves unseemly. Anyway, my train will decide for me. It goes at half-past six and I can get a taxi in Bournemouth to take me to school.”

“I can think of a better plan than that. We always get the caretaker here to make us a cup of tea after meetings. Why not join us? I’m sure your tissues need restoring. Then I’ll drive you home and we’ll have a bit of dinner on the way.”

“Oh, but, really, I . . .”

“That’s all right, then. Through the green baize door and down the back staircase and I’ll guarantee that Mrs. Dewes has heard the meeting break up and has put the kettle on. I’ll bet, too, that the canny Coningsby is on the same lay. Yes, here he is. Coningsby, old lad, meet our client socially and then be a good chap and phone up the garage and tell them to bring my car round in half-an-hour. I’m going to take Miss Pallis home.”

It was clear that Marchmont was not accustomed to cope with this sort of behaviour. She made no protest, accepted tea and a biscuit, and by half-past five Timothy’s Rolls was gliding through Chelsea. So far, she had said nothing since Timothy had put her into the car, but when they were headed for the A3 *en route* for Guildford, she asked,

"Do you always get your own way, as Lady Grace Norton said?"

"Not that I've noticed."

"I don't think people who always get what they want ever *do* notice. They take things for granted."

"Well, isn't that the best way to take them?"

"It's a matter of temperament, I suppose, and, of course, a matter of upbringing."

"Say on. We invite and welcome criticism."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream—I didn't mean—I don't know you nearly well enough to criticise you."

"A matter which time, I hope, will remedy. What *did* you mean, then?"

"Well, it was more than coincidence, wasn't it, when your president came out with exactly the same proposition as you had already put to me, and which you knew I'd accept?"

"Oh, the one day a week, three months a year, caretaker included? Yes, that was a put-up job. I had tipped him off that that was as far as you would be prepared to go."

"Was Lady Grace Norton in the plot?"

"Don't give it nasty names. It wasn't a plot. The committee have full powers, and could have smacked us down."

"But they tend to follow the president's lead, and *you* manage the president. Is that it?"

"You do me too much honour. Where would you like to dine?"

They did not linger over the after-dinner coffee, although Timothy, who felt considerable curiosity concerning his companion, would have liked to do so. He sensed, however, that she would be glad to be back at the school, so, at the decorous and seemly hour of a quarter to ten, he drove through the open gates of Purfleet Hall and up to the front door.

“One thing you might like to do,” he said, before they parted, “is to get that broken window at the back of the house repaired.”

“I thought you were going to demolish that wing.”

“We are, but that will come a good bit later on.

Remember the ashes of that fire in the undercroft? I don’t care to think that a tramp can get in. There’s enough to do without having to fumigate the place beforehand.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Postulant

"First," said the Chief Witch sternly, "do you know your catechism?"

"I—I think so," replied the trembling postulant.

"All right, we'll see. What are the measurements?"

"Nine feet."

"What shape is drawn?"

"A circle."

"Where is it drawn?"

"On the floor."

"How many circles altogether?"

"Three."

"Are they concentric?"

"Yes."

"How far apart?"

"Six inches."

"What words do we write outside the biggest circle?"

"I—I'm not sure how to pronounce the words. I'm sure I know them, though."

"Do your best. We're not fussy about foreign accents—not like some I could name!"

"You mean Mademoiselle," said the postulant, with a sycophantic snigger. "All right, then. On the north, Adhby. On the east Agial. On the south, Tabaoth. On the west, Jahweh."

"What do you understand by these words?"

"That ours is the oldest religion in the world."

"What else is drawn on the floor?"

"A triangle for the manifestation of spirits."

"What do we place in the centre of the smallest circle?"

"An altar."

"What form does the altar take?"

"It's a table."

"Who stands beside this table?"

"The—the magician, if there is one."

"And if not?"

"Well, I—I suppose *you* do."

"That is not the proper answer. Look here, do you want to join, or don't you?"

"Oh, yes, Sandra, you know I do! Of course I do."

"You mustn't use my name, then. You ought to know that. What *should* you call me?"

"The chief witch, I suppose."

"Well, don't forget again, or we'll blackball you out. We can't afford to have people with short memories, so mind!"

"Sorry, really I am. I didn't think."

"All right, then. What is placed upon the altar?"

"A knife with a black handle, a knife with a white handle, a cauldron, a wand, some candles . . ."

"Well, go on."

"Er—let's see. Oh, I know! Incense, a piece of cord, a thing—I mean, a brass vessel—to hold salted water—and—er—and—"

"Are you afraid to say it?"

"It sounds horrid. You—you don't hit me with it, do you?"

"It may or may not be used on you. I don't suppose it will, but you must chance it, because it's part of the ritual, so go on, say it."

"All right. A whip, but what I mean to say. . ."

"What figure is drawn upon the altar?"

"A—a pent-something, but I don't know what it is."

"Never mind what it is. You'll find out later. What does it look like, and what does it mean?"

"It means the earth. It—it looks like a funny-shaped star."

"Go on."

"How do you mean?"

"Tell me the meaning of some of the other things."

"Oh, I see. The black-handled knife means the air, the cauldron means water, the wand means fire and—er—well, I've said about the pent-thing, haven't I?"

"What does the whip mean?"

"Oh—er—purity, I think—yes, purity."

"You seem a bit doubtful about that."

"Oh, no, I'm not. Really I'm not. And—and the cord means the thing that binds together earth, air, fire, and water."

"Otherwise known as . . .?"

"The four elements."

"What's the salted water for?"

"I—I don't think I know."

"Well, stupid, what's water usually for?"

"For—for washing things, I suppose, and—and people, of course, and for drinking, and making tea and swimming in, and boating on, and—whatever more do you want?"

"All right. It's for washing things. What things?"

"Oh, well, the things on the table—er—the altar—and so on, I suppose."

"And so on! You suppose right. Well, you haven't done *too* badly with the catechism. Now, about your beliefs."

"Well, actually, my family are . . ."

"Your family's got nothing to do with it. Now, then: what are *your* beliefs? What do the witch-hunters mean by Night Travellers?"

"Evil spirits."

"Do you believe in evil spirits?"

"Yes—no—yes—well, I mean, I suppose there *are* such things. The Bible says so, and . . ."

"You seem a bit hazy about evil spirits, I *must* say. Of course they exist, but, remember, our power is for good, and the Things that haunt the hedgerows are not for us. Right? You can cut along now. Don't forget the meeting during eleven o'clock break tomorrow. That's when you will get your final briefing. Meanwhile, on pain of death, not a word to a soul!"

"Oh, no, of course not, Sand—er, Chief Witch. All right, then. See you at break tomorrow."

"I *think* she'll do," said the chief witch, critically. "She's in a bit of a funk, and that might be either good or bad for our project, because it could mean one of two things—either she'll go and squeal to someone and land us all in the most gosh-awful row, or else she'll be too dumb to think of doing anything except exactly what we tell her. We've just got to take a chance. We've got to have a scapegoat, and she's goat enough for anything, I *will* say that for Veronica Tooby."

The rest of the coven giggled, and Connie Moosedeer said:

"When are we going along to get things ready?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. Don't put your names down on the games list, and, for goodness' sake, don't go playing the fool in class and get yourselves put in detention."

"Look who's talking!" muttered Gillian. "Now what about these herbs we've collected?" she added hastily, observing the scowl upon her leader's freckled brow. "Did you buy those candles you promised, and did somebody manage to snaffle a clean tablecloth?"

"*Do* you mind?" asked the chief witch, fiercely. "If I say I'll do a thing, I do it, not like *some* people! And when this Sisterhood make promises, they'd jolly well better not break them!"

"Sorry. I was only trying to help."

"You leave it to me, and stop being a bossy cat." With this, the coven broke up.

“But, darling, it’s madness!” said Simon Bennison. “What are people going to think?”

“What do some of them think now? This meeting in empty classrooms after school, and both of us telling lies about where we’re going to spend our holidays and then meeting secretly in some out-of-the-way place where nobody else on the staff has planned to go—do you think people haven’t talked? I know they have. I’m tired of it, Simon. If we’re going to live in sin, let’s do it openly and properly. Who’s to blame us? Your marriage doesn’t work any more, unless Eunice recovers. If ever she does, I shall go out of your life as though I had never existed. I’ve always promised you that, and I shall keep to it. Meanwhile, I can’t go on like this. If we belong to one another, as you say we do, let’s belong cleanly, and let the world go hang.”

“There are our jobs to think of.”

“I don’t need mine, and what I have would keep the two of us.”

“I couldn’t live on your money.”

“Well, get a post where your private reputation doesn’t matter so much. You could go into industry, couldn’t you?”

“I suppose I could, but I wouldn’t want to. I don’t like teaching, and I don’t like the school, but I need time to write my book and compose my music, and I couldn’t get that in industry.”

“Then let’s make an end of things.”

“You couldn’t be as cruel as that! I thought you cared for me.”

“I care for you far too much to go on with this hole-and-corner business. You must make up your mind. I shall live at Little Monkshood anyway, when Mr. Herring’s people have done it up for me. I don’t ask you to live there all the time—I wouldn’t want you to do that. I need some sort of freedom. That’s why I wouldn’t marry you, even if you could get a divorce. It’s best to be honest about it. To have somewhere where we can really be together sometimes, and let the rest

of the world go by, that's all I want. I hoped you would want it, too."

"Of course I want it, Alison. I want it, and I want you. What I don't want, for both our sakes, is a scandal. Besides, that would involve the school."

"Not if I left before it had time to break. A scandal about *you* would be only a nine days' wonder, so long as I was no longer on the staff."

"I'm not so sure about that, Alison. One can't altogether dissociate one's private life from one's job, and if mine was suspect I might find it difficult to get another post. After all, there are the fees at the nursing home to think of, and the various little comforts and so forth which Eunice must have. I couldn't leave her in the lurch."

"No, of course you could not. Very well, but I still intend to live at Little Monkshood. It will be your affair, then, to do as you please. At least there I shall be away from prying eyes, if not free from gossiping tongues."

"Especially Vere's prying eyes. Yes, I know, but—well, I shall have to be careful, that's all."

"It doesn't sound very romantic." She smiled at the ridiculous word.

"If I were the swashbuckling, cavalier-type of man, you wouldn't want me. Your nature is too gentle and fastidious, and . . ."

"And I'm past my first youth, I suppose you mean. True enough. 'What is love? 'Tis not hereafter.'"

"Oh, Alison, don't say idiotic things like that!" He put his hands on her shoulders. "After all, we've known one another now for some years, and I love you as much as ever I did—perhaps more."

"Yes, we might be an old married couple, mightn't we? I'm beginning to see us as that."

"Alison, are you sure you're not taking Little Monkshood as much to get away from me as to be with me?"

Alison removed his hands from her shoulders and then shrugged, as though she were freeing herself from the memory of his touch.

"I had imagined it was the reverse of that," she said. "It seems that I must have been wrong."

"I don't think you understand yourself, do you? Alison, supposing I had been free to marry you when I first came to the school . . . or when we first met . . .?"

"But you wouldn't have *wanted* to marry me, Simon, if you had been free. I have never thought you would."

"Of course I should! I would give the heart out of my body to marry you!"

"Then you would be dead, and somebody else might have your heart. It's no longer true to say, 'My true love hath my heart, and I have his.'"

"This isn't the time to be flippant. We've got to decide what to do."

"I thought you *had* decided. All I want is for us to meet openly at the farmhouse instead of secretly here."

"What is the point? We still have the holidays. To meet at Little Monkshood is just plain silly. It can't mean anything more than a polite tea-party now and again."

"No, I suppose not—from *your* point of view."

"Besides, I should still have to visit Eunice at week-ends."

"Yes."

"Alison, give up all idea of living away from the school! At least, while we meet in classrooms, whatever people suspect, they can't possibly *know*. But if you take this house, and live alone, and I visit you there, what are they going to think?"

"If I don't mind what they think, why should you?"

"But I want to protect you from those kinds of thoughts! I want you . . ."

"Unspotted from the world? My poor Simon, it's much too late in the day to think of that! Never mind! We'll have

an occasional polite tea-party and invite Vere, then she'll know that her suspicions are groundless."

"But they're not groundless. I don't trust her, Alison. She'll make mischief. She's only been waiting for an opportunity like this."

"Like what?"

"Your going off and living alone."

"I can't let Vere rule our lives, Simon, although, goodness knows, she's tried hard enough. Besides, there's something about Vere that you don't know yet—something that could put an end to all your scruples about coming to me at Little Monkshood."

"What would that be?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"It could only mean that she's leaving the school."

"Would it make any difference to your attitude if she were?"

"Well, it would make a certain amount of difference in a way, I suppose. I shouldn't feel so apprehensive, I admit. She gets on my nerves, Alison. I'm sorry to say it, but she frightens me. She hates us, you know."

"Oh, no. She hates *me*, not *us*."

"She senses what our relationship is, and she hates it."

"Yes, that must be true. She wants you for herself. She always has."

"Is she leaving the school?"

"I did not say so."

"But are you *sure* that house where we went is still empty?" demanded Caroline.

"Yes, of course I'm sure, Old Lily-Guts!"

"There's no occasion to be vulgar."

"That's not vulgar. It's nearly Shakespeare."

"It's an awfully *old* house. You don't suppose it's haunted, do you?" asked Stephanie.

"All the better if it is," replied her intrepid leader. "If anybody happens to spot our lighted candles, he'll think it's the ghost, and it will scare him off."

"Suppose there's a tramp sleeping in it?" suggested Mavis. "I believe I'd rather run into a ghost than a tramp. He might be drunk and turn nasty."

"We shall have two knives and the riding-crop and the cauldron. It'll be seven to one, anyway, so what are you beefing about? If you want to be a witch, you can't be a coward as well."

"I'm *not* a coward. I want to be prepared, that's all."

"Well, now you know. All of you depart in the names of the Mighty Ones and do not fail of our holy meeting. Oh, and, by the way, some workmen may have mended that broken window I told you about, so I shall sneak into the kitchen tonight for some treacle. Who's got a piece of thick brown paper? Stephanie, you had a parcel from home. Have you still got the wrapping? All right, then, don't you forget to bring it along. Connie, you're in her dorm. It's up to you to make sure she's got it with her, so we can break the window properly. Now for Veronica. I hope she hasn't gone and got cold feet!"

Veronica's feet were rather colder at the thought of letting down Sandra and the others than at the contemplation of the night's wild enterprise. Filled with a mixture of serious misgivings and heart-thumping excitement, she left her bed in the dormitory she shared with three others and, shoes in hand and a sweater and an overcoat pulled on over her pyjamas, she crept downstairs to the trysting-place and joined the others in the hall.

Those asleep in the house did not stir. The rest of the school were a couple of floors higher up, the staff were not directly over the hall, the servants were in the attics and the dreaded and respected Miss Pomfret-Brown was sleeping a dictator's self-satisfied sleep in her own distant wing of the house. Sandra put a finger to her lips and carefully unbolted

the heavy Georgian front door. Her coven and the postulant trooped out behind her and put on their shoes.

It was a long walk down the drive, but the lodge at the gates was passed safely, for the gates were always open. It was an even longer walk to Little Monkshood, but excitement and the spirit of adventure kept the coven moving cheerfully. They reached their objective at midnight. The house gave at least one of its visitors the impression that it resented their presence, but the chief witch, whatever her private feelings, led her group bravely round to the window which had been broken. It had not been mended.

"Now," said Sandra, when the coven, having climbed in one by one, were assembled in the basement kitchen and had lighted the candles they had brought with them, "all of you take your shoes off and ruffle up your hair. And, mind, not a word said except the ones you've learnt. Bring over that old table. Now, first of all, I trace the outer circle with the black-handled—no, first I must put on my garters, my badges of rank. That's it! Stop sniggering, Gillian! You only show how ignorant you are. Now for the *athame*—that's the black-handled knife." She drew it from her overcoat pocket. "Now I chalk the circle in. Where's the chalk you pinched from the history room, Gillian? All right. Got that tape-measure, Mavis? One of you hold the candle while I measure. O.K. Now for the inside circles. That's it. Now the triangle for the spirits."

"I don't think much of those for circles," said Gillian. "You should have let Connie draw them."

"I couldn't. She's not the chief witch. The exact shape doesn't matter. It's only to make sure the altar is completely enclosed. Now put all the things on the table. It's a nuisance we couldn't get a sword, but I've put silver paper on this poker. Stephanie, you hold it. Now, Veronica, sit on the floor and stare at it. Shine your candle on it a bit more, Caroline. Now while she's getting hypnotised—don't you dare take

your eyes off it, Veronica—I'll sanctify the circles with the salted water. Now, except Veronica and Stephanie, we all walk round."

Five silent figures perambulated the outer circle, the mystic silence broken only by a nervous fit of giggling by Stephanie and Mavis, and the rumbling of Connie Moosedeer's hungry Red Indian stomach. The chief witch spoke again, her stern voice a reproach to the impious gigglers.

"I call on the Mighty Ones, the ancient gods of north, east, south, and west, to assemble."

Something rustled and scurried in the darkness beyond the row of pillars which supported the roof of the undercroft. Veronica screamed, and two of the walkers stopped dead in their tracks and were cannoned into by those coming behind them.

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" ejaculated the chief witch, albeit on a high note of panic scarcely held at bay. "It's only a rat or something. Stand up, Veronica. Are you hypnotised enough?"

"Y-yes, I think so. But I'm terrified of rats."

"Don't be silly." The leader had regained command over her voice. "Now I'm going to put the point of the knife against your chest. Stand quite still, because it's a kitchen knife and it's beastly sharp. Now, then, repeat after me:

"It is better to die the death . . ."

"It is better to die the death . . ."

"Than to attempt to understand the Mysteries . . ."

"Than to attempt to understand the Mysteries . . ."

"If the heart is overcome by fear."

"If the heart is overcome by fear."

"O.K. Now for the password. What is it?"

"I—er—ooh—half a minute—oh, yes! Faith, love, and trust."

"Right. Now you can step into the circle. I close it round you by walking all round it and pointing the knife at it.

Blindfold her, you two who've got the pillowcase. Just put it over her head."

"Stop struggling, Veronica, you ass!" said one of the manipulants roughly. "We're not going to hurt you."

"Now bind her hands with the cord from the altar . . . Done it? Right. Now lead her . . . oh, golly! None of this is any good! We'll have to start all over again!"

"Oh, why?" asked several dissentient voices.

"I forgot to write the words for the circle, and we didn't draw the pentagram on the altar."

"Well, write them now," said Gillian, in practical tones. "We can't go through everything again. There isn't time."

"There's got to be time."

"We've got to get back to school before it gets light, and the sun rises at just after four, and it's light enough for us to be spotted long before that."

"How do *you* know when the sun rises?"

"It's in my diary, so, go on, write the words, and let's get on with it. Apart from anything else, my feet are freezing on this beastly stone floor."

"I'm cold all over," said a discontented voice. "I expect this place is damp."

"If we all catch colds, there'll be questions asked," pronounced another Cassandra.

"Oh, all right, then, but I hope it won't put things all wrong," said the leader grimly. "Got your pocket compass, Mavis? Thanks. Start at the north, that's—" she printed the word with great care—"Adhby. South . . . no, I'd better do it in the proper order, not to give offence to the Mighty Ones . . . east, that's Agial. Now the south . . . can't you hold that candle steady, Gillian? You've dripped grease all over my fingers! South, that's Tabaoth, and, last of all, west, and that's Jahweh. Now, Veronica, I'm going to lead you round the circle to each compass point and present you to the gods."

"Hurry up, then," pleaded a muffled voice from the inside of the pillowslip. "I'm getting spifflicated in this thing."

"All in good time. If you were going to be burnt as a witch, in the way they treated our sisters now gone before us, you wouldn't worry about a little thing like a pillowcase." The chief witch led her captive to the compass points. "And you'd better bow as I name each one," she said. This part of the ritual accomplished, the postulant was led to the altar. "Kneel down, Veronica."

"Untie my hands and take this beastly thing off my head, then."

"Well, all right, but I'm not sure that's allowed for in the ritual. There you are. Now kneel. We're going to tie your feet together this time. Got that second skipping-rope from the gym, Mavis?"

"No, I didn't think we needed two."

"I told you!"

"No, you didn't. Anyway, I don't think I could have got away with two."

"Well, as we've untied her hands, it doesn't matter. Kneel up properly, Veronica! Don't sit back on your heels like that!"

"This stone floor is so beastly hard!"

"Oh, stop complaining! Now then: Are you ready to swear that you will be true to the Craft?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

"That's not the way to answer. Say, 'I will.'"

"Like in the marriage service," said Gillian helpfully, with another snigger.

"Oh, Gillian, be quiet! Anybody would think *you* were chief witch, the way you throw your weight about."

"If I'd been chief witch, I shouldn't have forgotten an important thing like writing the words round the circle. There's another thing you've forgotten, too."

"Oh, get lost!" said the leader uneasily. "There can't be!"

"In that book you showed me," said the critic inexorably, "there were little pentagons or pentagrams—anyway, those little five-pointed star things—drawn in the space between the outer and the middle circle."

"Oh, I don't suppose they matter," said the chief witch, in a tone of calculated casualness. "I'll just sketch in a few. Who's got the piece of chalk?"

"You had it last, to write the words. I expect it's on the floor somewhere," said Gillian.

A hasty search by candle-light proved that it was indeed on the floor, crushed into powder by the feet of one or more of the coven.

"That's torn it," said Connie Moosedeer. "It's the only stick of chalk we brought with us. I thought I was treading on a stone. It hurt, but, like all my people—"

"Oh, well," said the leader, who could feel her power slipping from her, "it doesn't really matter. I'll just sketch in a few with the point of the knife. We don't *have* to chalk them in."

The ritual proceeded, after a high-voiced protest from the postulant as she saw the chief witch take the riding crop from the altar.

"You're jolly well not going to hit me with that thing!"

"No, no. It's the purification ceremony. I shall only tap you on the back with it. It won't hurt at all. Don't be such a baby. Now, then. One, two, three. One, two three, four, five, six, seven. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one. Are you always prepared to protect and defend all other members of our Art?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Say, 'I am.' Go on."

"All right. I am."

"Now I untie your feet and put the whip back on the altar, so now say after me: In the presence of the Mighty Ones . . ."

"In the presence of the Mighty Ones . . ."

The oath continued and came to its appointed end. It was an oath of secrecy, and the postulant imagined that she would have little difficulty in keeping it. It would never do for Miss Salter or her mother to know that she was a witch.

"Now," said the mistress of ceremonies, "who's got the drop of paraffin? Carol, you were told to pinch it from the woodshed."

"Yes, all right. I've got it. Here you are."

"Hey!" protested the postulant. "I don't want a bath in the stuff! It smells filthy! Oh, oh! Oh, I say! You've spilt it all over me!"

"Sorry. You'll have to wash your hair before you go into class, I'm afraid. The bottle slipped. Don't fuss! Now the next thing ought to be wine, but we couldn't manage that. Who's got the vinegar? Right Here we go. It'll help to disguise the smell of the paraffin, I hope. Now I'm supposed to kiss you. Oh, well, here goes. Now I present to you the things on the altar. Touch and remit, if you know what that means."

"Oh, yes. Miss Marchmont Pallis told us in history lesson."

"Right. Now I present you to the gods. Receive thy neophyte, O Adhby, and thou, too, great Agial. Thou, Tabaoth, take thy disciple to thee, and thou, greatest of all, Jahweh, the god of . . ."

There was a sudden rush of flame along the stone floor. One of the coven had dropped a lighted candle which had just deposited, from the inch or so of wax remaining, a blob of very hot grease on to her fingers. The flame ignited the spilt paraffin and this caught a pile of loose straw swept to

the open hearth by Marchmont's scavengers who had tidied up the place against Timothy's and Parsons' meeting.

"Scram!" yelled somebody. "The house is on fire!"

"One at a time through the window, you silly cuckoos!" shouted the chief witch. "You don't want to break your silly necks! And pick up your shoes, quick!"

From the Dorchester road the schoolgirls looked back. No sheet of flame lit up the night; no pall of smoke came wafting towards them on the south-west wind. The clear sky was luminous with stars and a vast peace enfolded Dorset. The weed-entangled river was silent. There were no lights in the public house, or in the mill or in any of the cottages. It seemed a very long walk back to the school. The coven reached the lodge gates at last and, walking on the grass to avoid making a sound on the gravel path, eventually, with dew-soaked shoes, they reached the front door. This they had left ajar. The children crept in, closed the great door with a clang which seemed to their alert and fearful senses to echo and re-echo throughout the ancient house, and, shoes in hand, they ascended the splendid stair.

"It's an awful nuisance we didn't have a chance to stay and do the spell," said Gillian at break on the following morning. "I don't think we'd better go to Little Monkshood again. No point in pushing our luck."

Her leader finished masticating a section of digestive biscuit and stared at her until Gillian dropped her eyes.

"I should jolly well think so," said Sandra. "Who do you think you are, Gillian Schofield? You will leave all decisions to me, and I say we *must* go back. For one thing, you stupid idiot, we've left all those things there, and if they're discovered they may be traced to us, and then we *shall* be in queer street. If anybody finds that bottle of paraffin and those matches and candles, they might think we tried to burn the house down, and that's a crime called arson, and you can be put in prison for years and years and *years* for doing that."

"They wouldn't put people of our age in prison," said Gillian.

"Well, anyway, they're not going to get the chance. Besides, I'm not going to leave my riding-crop there. It was one of my birthday presents."

"There's the brass vase I pinched from the prefects' room, too," said Connie Moosedeer, "and the poker and the knives that came from the kitchen. I expect those things have been missed already."

"Of course they have, and they must be put back. We're not thieves, and it's just as bad as stealing if you borrow things and don't return them. Besides, Veronica's hair still stinks of paraffin, so that's a nice give-away if anybody gets suspicious. We'd better draw lots to see who's to go back to Little Monkshood. It doesn't need all of us. There isn't all that much to carry, and we can do the spell at the same time. We may not get another chance this term."

"You'll be one of those to go, of course," said Gillian, sneering.

"Don't be insubordinate! I've told you once. As it happens, I *shall* be one to go. The rest of you can take your chance, although, if it was left to me to choose . . ." she eyed her followers one after another . . . "I'd have Connie and—well, it ought to be Veronica, I suppose, because, being newly admitted, she may be in a state of . . ."

"Grace?" hazarded Stephanie.

"Well, yes, sort of, I suppose. What about it, you two?"

"Certainly," said Connie Moosedeer. "The traditions of my tribe are geared to enterprises of reckless daring."

"Yes, well, I think we ought to draw lots, all the same, except me and Veronica," said Sandra.

"Oh, *please*, Sandra, I'd really rather not. I didn't know we'd have to break bounds and go into spooky houses, and all that. I let you do all those things to me last night, and I—I well, I do think that's about my share for a bit."

"We shall want you to do the spell! You can't funk *that*!"

“What—what spell, Sandra? I’m not going back to that house again! What are you going to make a spell for?”

“All in good time. Now, I’ve put a cross on one of these bits of paper, and whoever draws that will come with me and Veronica this afternoon. It’s the semi-finals of the tennis tournament, so, if we watch out, it should be easy enough to slip away. Here you are! I’ve mixed them up in the bottom of my glass. They may be a little bit milky, but I think I’ve emptied the glass.”

“I’ve got it,” said Stephanie. “Oh, well, that’s just my bit of good luck, because I can’t go.”

“*Can’t go?*” asked Sandra. “You’ve got to go! You’ve drawn the paper with the cross on it.”

“But I’m in D. this afternoon!”

“You silly cuckoo! I told you all to stay out of trouble!”

“Sorry, and all that!”

“You don’t sound sorry.”

“Rather than go back to Little Monkshood and pick up the things we left there, I’d go into D. every day of the week, so there!” said Stephanie defiantly.

“I believe you got yourself stuck in D. on purpose!”

“No, I didn’t. How did I know you’d want to go back to that beastly house?”

Well, you’ll have to cut D. that’s all.”

“Cut D.! Good gracious, Sandra, be your age! I’d get into the most awful trouble! I’d be sent to Miss Salter, for sure.”

“Oh, no, you wouldn’t. Just say you forgot.”

“What, with the tennis semi-finals going on? She’d think I’d sneaked out of D. to watch them.”

“Um, yes, I see what you mean. We’ll have to draw lots again, that’s all.”

There were violent protests against this decision.

“Oh, well,” said Connie, philosophically, “looks like it’s up to me and you, Sandra, but how will we carry out the

spell if the proper person doesn't want to go with us?" she stared hard at Veronica. Sandra made up her mind.

"You're right," she said abruptly. "Veronica, you'll have to come along. It's the only reason we let you join, now I come to think of it."

"Oh, no, Sandra, please! I—I don't want to cast spells and kill people!"

"Did you, or didn't you, swear you'd be true to the Craft?"

"Yes, but I didn't know what it meant."

"That's not my fault. Being true to the Craft means what I choose it to mean, and in this case it means putting a spell on nasty old April Fool and making her sorry she was born. See?"

"But I don't *want* to put a spell on her. I don't want to put a spell on anybody!"

"Well, you're jolly well going to! Meet me and Connie at half-past two at the gate into the woods. We'll slip out that way because everybody will be watching the tennis, so we can't risk going out by the front gate. If you don't come, we'll put a spell on you, and then there'll be a train crash on your way home for the holidays, and you won't be killed, but you'll be a cripple for the rest of your life. Understand?"

"But, if we're caught out of bounds . . ."

"We simply say that Miss Marchmont Pallis sent us to finish clearing up the house for her."

"Would we get away with it?"

"Unless it's Marchmont herself who catches us. Two-thirty at the little gate, and don't you dare be late or try to back out of it!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Spell

To Timothy, standing, pipe in mouth, in the overgrown, summer-tired garden of Little Monkshood, the sight of three small girls, a redhead, a blue-black head, and a mousy-coloured head, came as no particular surprise. He was glad to see them and, taking out his pipe, he waved it at them and gave them a cordial smile and a cheerful, "Hullo, there! How's tricks?" He assumed that they had been sent by Marchmont Pallis to finish the clearing-up. He had been inside the house again and had noted the burnt straw and the hastily-drawn circles and triangle on the floor of the undercroft, and at first he had put these down to the activities of village children, for the broken window offered easy access to the house.

What were not capable of obvious and simple explanation, apart from the rickety table which had been left in the undercroft by the outgoing tenants, were a new and expensive riding-crop, a heavy brass vase, an iron saucepan, (surely something which would have been missed from a village home), a poker sheathed in silver paper (open to the same query), and no fewer than seven half-gutted candles.

He paid more attention to the *graffiti*. However advanced the teaching in the school, he doubted whether it included, correctly spelt, the words Adhby, Agial, Tabaoth, and Jahweh, although, of course, one never knew, nowadays, what the curriculum might contain. Then there

was the presence of a good quality pillowcase. This he picked up and examined. Clearly stitched on the tuck-in flap was a strip marked *Purfleet Hall School*.

"Curiouser and curiouser," he remarked aloud. "What on earth has Alison been up to?" It was at this point that he had gone outside to see whether, by any lucky chance, she had decided to fall in with his suggestion, conveyed to her by letter, that she should join him and Parsons in their last look over the house before the workmen came in. He had small hope, however, of seeing her. He feared that, in the afternoon, and so very near the end of term, it was unlikely she would be able to get away.

"Oh, gracious!" exclaimed Sandra, as soon as she became aware of him. "There's a man in the garden! Oh, he seems friendly enough." She returned Timothy's greeting.

"We'd better go back," said Veronica.

"We could wait," said Connie. "He's only looking at the roof. I expect he'll go away soon. We don't want to walk all this way for nothing. Let's just pretend we've come to have a look at the house, and then walk away and wait for him to go."

"We're going to stick to what we planned," said Sandra. "I know a girl who was one of Marchmont's cleaning-up squad, so I'm going to pretend that's what we've come for. Nobody can object to some of us coming along to finish the job. Take your cue from me, and, Veronica, you're not to say a word. Understand?"

"Hullo," said Timothy, as they advanced towards him. "Three of Miss Pallis's good angels?"

"Yes," said Sandra, lifting innocent-seeming eyes to his. "But she doesn't know, so you won't ever tell her, will you? It's to be a surprise."

"Doing good by stealth, eh? But where are the brooms and buckets?"

"Oh, we—we shan't need them this time."

"I see." He surveyed them with some amusement. "Do we exchange names? I don't suppose yours are half as silly as mine. I'm Timothy Herring."

"If you don't think of fish, it's a very nice name," said Sandra politely. "I'm Sandra. This is Connie. She's a Red Indian chief's daughter, rather like a princess, actually. And this is Veronica."

"How do you do?"

"How do you do?"

"Well, that being that, let me open the front door for you," said Timothy. "It will be the last time you'll use it, I expect. We shall bring in the demolition gang on Monday, and begin restoring this place to the shape the builder first thought of." He produced his key and unlocked the ground-floor entrance. "There we are. By the way, I'm a warlock."

Three audible, distinct and terror-stricken gasps were the reaction to this casual and yet startling announcement. Then Sandra pulled herself together.

"I'm chief witch," she said, "and you are my master."

"Where did you learn the magic arts, O Chief Witch?"

"From our sacred books, O Master. Actually," she went on, "I got them out of the library last holidays on my mother's tickets. I pretended they were for her, because I couldn't use my tickets in the grown-ups' section."

"What gave you the idea of becoming a witch?"

"I thought it might come in useful."

"I see that it has. I hope yours is white and not black magic."

"Well," said Sandra cautiously, observing that the prudent and practical Connie Moosedeer and the fearful Veronica had sidled away and left her, as leader, to hold the uncomfortable fort, "that depends what you mean."

"I mean you make witchcraft potions to cure sickness in mankind and in cattle. You make spells to ensure good crops. You distil love philtres and weave charms against the Evil Eye."

"Well," said Sandra, "we shall do those sort of things later on, I expect, but they're more difficult, aren't they? At the moment we're—we're on to something easier, but something that has to be done. You see, I've been insulted."

"Maligned?"

"Yes, maligned as well."

"Slandered?"

"Well, sort of, yes. I mean, my appearance has."

"Surely not!"

"Yes. It's my freckles, you see."

"But what could be more pleasant?" He inspected her snub-nosed, childish countenance. "Does your detractor not realise that only the fairest face, the most delicate and rose-leaf skin, can freckle so prettily under the summer sun?"

"She called me . . ." Sandra choked on the wounding words ". . . she called me Cuckoo Egg."

"I should have biffed her in the eye and called her Polyphemus."

"How do you know she was that much bigger than me?"

"There is but little which is hidden from me." One of Sandra's own size, he reflected, would scarcely have had the temerity to insult so obviously quick-tempered and redoubtable an opponent.

"So I'm having my revenge on her, you see."

"Very proper." Light had dawned. "Are the magic signs and symbols I espied herein the instruments of your revenge?"

"Oh, no. Not really. We were—what's the word I want?—we were only bringing a new witch into the coven."

"Ah. Inducting a postulant, you mean."

"Yes, that's it. Inducting a postulant." She stored up the useful and impressive phrase. "She's one of those," she jerked her head towards her followers, "the gommy-looking one with the drabby hair—Veronica. She's the most awful ass. I'm not sure we ought to have chosen her."

"And now you've come to clear up. I see. What is new to me in your ritual is the burnt straw."

"Oh, that wasn't anything to do with it. It was that ass Caroline did that. Just because she got a drop of hot grease on her fingers, she dropped her candle, and some paraffin got spilt on the straw, so it all went up in flames and we had to scram, in case we'd set the house on fire, you see."

"Paraffin?"

"Well, olive oil was what it ought to have been, of course—to anoint Veronica, you know—but we couldn't get any from the kitchen, so we had to make do with paraffin."

"Of course. Better than nothing. Well, you'd like to get on with your job. I'm expecting a friend to join me at any time now, and there's just the chance that Miss Marchmont Pallis may turn up."

"Marchmont?" Sandra's little face went white under the freckles. "Oh, *no!*"

"Why? Is she such a dragon?"

"Oh, no. We like her, lots. Well, admire her, perhaps I should say. Except," added Sandra darkly, "we don't think much of her choice of a man. Well, he's hardly a man, really. It's Simple Simon."

"Simple Simon?"

"Simple Simon Bennison. He's our music master, and a right stot."

"A right stot?"

"It's what Morag Mackenzie calls him. I don't know what it means. It *sounds* like swearing, but I shouldn't think it is, because Morag is Wee Free, and most fearfully upright in religion."

"I should like to meet her."

"Yes. Well, if you'll excuse me, I think we'd better start our clearing up, especially if Marchmont is coming."

"I quite agree. If she doesn't know you're here, you'd better work fast."

"You're not coming inside with us, are you?" asked Sandra, quickly.

"Not to get in your way. I'm going upstairs to have a look at the timbering in the attics. There's no mess except a bit in the kitchen. The school press-gang seem to have made a splendid job of the other rooms."

"Oh, you've been in the house before, then? Before today, I mean."

"Oh, yes, several times. Well, see you later, perhaps." To the great relief of the children, he turned towards the winding stone staircase.

"We have to be awfully quick with the spell, in case he comes down again," murmured Sandra. "This is a frightful nuisance. I thought we'd have the place to ourselves."

"I still think we ought to go," urged Veronica.

"Oh, be quiet!" snapped her leader. "It doesn't matter a bit what *you* think. You just do as you're told!"

"But if Marchmont is coming . . ."

"She hasn't come yet. If she catches us, put a good face on it and swear we only came to finish clearing up. She can't very well punish us for that, if it's for her benefit, can she?"

"She can bawl us out for breaking bounds," said Connie. "Well, come on. Let's get on with it, because, when we've done the spell, we must do a bit of clearing up for the look of the thing."

"Better rub out our magic circles, too, when we've done the spell," said Sandra. "I know Mr. Herring noticed them, and he says he's a warlock, though I think perhaps he was only pulling my leg. He's awfully nice, though. Now, Veronica, take the sword—that's the poker—in your right hand, and my riding-crop—that's the wand—in your left, and repeat after me . . ."

"I don't want to, Sandra!"

"*And repeat after me:* by these symbols, the signs of my office . . ."

"By these symbols, the signs of my office . . ."

"Being offered in the names of the four sons of Cham-Zoroaster . . ."

"Being offered in the names of the four sons of Cham-Zoroaster . . ."

"Namely, Cush, Mizraim, Phut, and Canaan . . ."

"Namely, Cush, Mizraim, Phut, and Canaan . . ."

"Being the lords of magic over Africa, Egypt, the children of the desert, and the men of Phoenicia . . ."

"Being the lords of magic over Africa, Egypt, the children of the desert, and the men of Phoenicia—but, Sandra, that's silly!"

"Would you blaspheme the ancient gods?"

"No, of course not, but, well, I mean, Egypt's *in* Africa, and so is the desert."

"I'm asking you to cast a spell, not give a geography lesson," observed the chief witch coldly. "Now then: and by the sacred magic of Abramelin the Mage, and in the names of Balan and Bayemon, I pronounce this magic spell of sentence of death upon . . ."

The trembling neophyte pronounced the names of that magician who was the first to appear after the Flood, followed by the names of the demons, and then flung down the poker and the riding-crop and burst into tears.

"I can't! I can't go on with it!" she sobbed. "It's wicked and it's horrible! I won't! I won't wish her to die!"

Connie Moosedeer clapped a hand over Veronica's mouth and dragged her towards the open doorway.

"Shut up, you fool!" she muttered fiercely. "That man will hear you!" She sent her flying. Veronica cannoned against the wall and the shock arrested her sobs. She sat on the ground with her head between her hands. Sandra came over to her.

"You've broken the spell!" she said. "*Now* what's going to happen?"

“Never mind that!” hissed Connie. “Get on with it yourself, and hurry up! Marchmont may be here at any minute, or that man might come down the stairs. Do the job that’s got to be done, and let’s clear out. There’s no time to mess about now!”

“You’ll pay for this, Veronica!” promised Sandra. “All right, then. Most of the words have been said. If you want to save your beastly little life, pick up the sword and the wand and hand them to me when I’m inside the magic circle. But first, as they’ve been invoked . . .” She walked over to the roughly-drawn triangle —“I’d better put us outside the power of the demons. O lords of the nether regions, dukes, counts and other noblemen of hell, confine yourselves to this triangle until our spell be cast and our work ended.”

She stepped into the chalk circle and, poker and riding-crop in hand, stood in front of the altar-table and ceremonially spat three times on the candle-wax doll which lay there. Then she lowered her voice to a blood-curdling growl.

“In the name of Byleth, king among kings in the infernal regions, and in the name of Bune, demon-haunter of tombs, I do unto this waxen image—got the black-headed pins, Connie? Right!—as I will it shall be done unto April Fool Bounty.”

Sandra laid the poker on the altar, took the black-headed pins from Connie and, watched by Veronica, now seated on the floor with tear-streaked face and horrified eyes, she stuck the pins, with some difficulty, into the wax effigy of April Bounty. Then she transferred the riding-crop wand from her left hand to her right, waved it three times, and traced with it the course of the innermost circle.

“That ought to do the trick,” she observed, as she joined the others. “Now we’d better get out of this before Marchmont catches us. Oh, don’t be such a cry-baby, Veronica!” (Veronica had begun to sniffle again.) “I don’t really suppose she’ll die. No such luck! And now we’d better

collect the things from the altar and see what we can do with all this burnt-up mess.”

“Where did you learn the spell?” asked Connie, when Veronica had been sent out to dip their three handkerchiefs in the well after she had emptied the salted water from the last night’s brass vase into it.

“I didn’t. I sort of made it up out of books and things, you know. In one book I read, there was only white witchcraft, like we used yesterday to initiate that ass Veronica, and it didn’t tell you how to cast spells, anyway. It was more sort of descriptive, and said what good people witches really are.”

“Is a spell you make up any good, then? You may not have said the right words.”

“Well, somebody must have made up all the spells at some time or other, mustn’t they? I’ve just made up another one, that’s all.”

Timothy came down to find three little blackamoors taking the last remnants of burnt straw into the garden, and the kitchen floor messy with half-obliterated damp chalk-marks, but the implements of magic, including the crude wax doll, had been collected into the pillowcase with which the postulant had been blindfolded. He smiled at them.

“You could do with a wash, couldn’t you?” he suggested.

“Yes, but we’ve got nothing to wash *with*,” said Sandra. “We’ve mucked up our handkerchiefs cleaning the floor.”

“Well, I always carry a spare one to dry the tears of women whose hearts I break, so here you are. You haven’t got all that much on your faces, and your hands won’t notice at all unless you wave them about at people. Don’t tumble down the well! I’ll keep *cave* for you, in case Miss Pallis turns up.”

“Oh, thank you! You *are* nice,” said Sandra. “Actually, she’d be pretty mad at us if she found us here.”

“So I had rather gathered. Which way will you go back to avoid meeting her along the road?—that is, supposing she decides to come here.”

“She’s certain to,” said Sandra. “It’s only the tennis tournament this afternoon.”

“Oh, well, if she does turn up, I think you’d better get into my car and crouch on the floor. Then I’ll inveigle her into the house and you can nip back to school as soon as she’s safely incarcerated. How would that be?”

“I think you’re an *ange!*” said the chief witch fervently.

CHAPTER NINE

The End of a Summer

Unaware that he had been rendering aid to the would-be murderers of his cousin, Timothy strolled to the broken gate while the three members of the coven, crouched on the floor of his car, were attempting to stifle their giggles. What with the novel experience of hiding from authority and the relief at not having had to pronounce the spell, even Veronica was overcome by slightly hysterical mirth.

"Shut up and listen," muttered the leader at last. Her retinue controlled itself and all three children pricked their ears for any sounds which should indicate that the senior history mistress had arrived. They were not kept waiting. Timothy came up to the car and said:

"She's coming along the lane." Then he strolled back to the gate. "I hoped you'd manage to come along," he said to Marchmont. "Did your nominee win?"

"Yes, she did, so I shan't be able to come tomorrow. The final is going to be played," said Marchmont, "and I can't let my own horse down, so I thought I would come today."

"Well, the workmen are not going to make a start until Monday. Come inside and I'll try to show you what we now propose to have done. It won't be nearly as big a job as we thought. We're going to demolish the back of the house entirely, as I told you—a case of simple and complete destruction. After that, we shall begin at the top and work downwards." His voice was lost to the little girls. Sandra got up and peeped out of the window.

"All clear," she said. "Let's scram."

"I see," said Marchmont, gazing through the open trapdoor at the beams of the attic. "The ceiling goes first, and then the party walls."

"Yes, they're only breeze blocks or lath and plaster. By the time you get back from your holiday you'll be able to move in, if you want to. Of course, you'll be inconvenienced a bit at first, because the house is to be wired for electricity and we're going to give you piped water. They've got it in those cottages on the main road, so it won't be difficult to bring it here, and it means you'll be able to have a bath in comfort. We're putting a bathroom in the undercroft and making one of the slits into a window capable of being opened."

"That's marvellous," Marchmont said gratefully. "I wasn't much looking forward to bringing bath-water in buckets from the well and heating it over an open fire."

"Oh, there'll be no necessity for anything like that, because we can fix you up with an immersion heater in an airing cupboard. That will also be in the undercroft, and you can keep it and the bathroom locked when the visitors are admitted. We've persuaded the committee to agree to Saturday afternoons only, and for four months of the summer, May, June, July, and August. In the end, a subversive element jibbed at only three, so, as they'd agreed about electricity and the plumbing, we gave way gracefully, and I've found a chap in Peterminster—one of the curators at the museum there—to come and cope when this place is open to the public, so there won't be anything for you to bother about, and you need not even be here on those days unless you like. I expect there are plenty of things you'll want to do on summer Saturday afternoons. I'm still a bit worried at the idea of your living alone in a place like this, but that's up to you, I suppose." He smiled at her. She flushed and suddenly said:

"I shan't always be alone. There's a friend who will be here most week-ends, I hope."

"That's good," said Timothy. "You're the wrong age to live all by yourself and to yourself."

She laughed.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Not young enough to place independence above rubies, and not old enough to find yourself your own best company."

"I see. You appear to know all about it."

"I do. I live alone, too, except for a few servants. But then, I never stay put for very long together."

"Phisbe?"

"Mostly. And travel. And visiting friends."

The tooting of a horn announced the arrival of Tom Parsons. Timothy left Alison in the solar and went down the wooden ladder which the last tenants had inserted in order to avoid using the newel stair.

"Hullo, Tom," he said. "I've got the purchaser here, but I haven't had a chance to tell her everything we propose to do to the house. Perhaps you'd like to take on the job."

"I can't stay long." Diana's last words rang in his dutiful, husbandly ears. (If that girl is there, you leave them alone and don't play gooseberry.) "I was delayed on the road. Picked up a puncture just the other side of Salisbury."

"What on earth made you come through Salisbury?"

"I had to. A job on a reconditioned house. I do have a private practice as well as working for Phisbe."

"Of course, of course. Well, come and give this place a last going-over, and then we'll excuse you from our presence."

"So now you know exactly what we've planned," said Timothy to Marchmont when, at the end of twenty minutes, Parsons had taken himself off, "and I've had an idea. My own place in the Cotswolds is a partial reconstruction. Why not come and have a look at it?"

“Well, thank you for the suggestion, but, if you remember, I’ve already seen your house. I went there with your cousin, when she and I were going into partnership over this one.”

“Ah, yes, but you’d understand much better now. As I think I told you at the time, it was an old coaching inn, and I’ve made it over by roofing in that courtyard you saw, round which the inn was built, and sinking the floor three feet and making it into a sunk garden with a fishpond and water-lilies and things. Rather nice. Why don’t you bring my cousin, or someone, with you and come and stay for a bit? School finishes this week, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, but I’d intended to stay up and polish off some jobs. All the same . . .”

“All the same, you’ll come. That’s fine. Look here, why April? The girl’s a pain in the neck. Bring along the friend who’s going to spend the week-ends here with you. Why not?” He felt intense curiosity concerning Simple Simon Bennison.

“There’s a reason why not,” she said.

“Too bad.” He was also curious to know the reason, but shrewdly guessed what it was. However, she did not inform him. She said:

“I’d love to come, but couldn’t I get there and back in a day? April and I did it easily, if you remember.”

“Meaning you’ll come on your own? Fine! I could meet you in Stroud with my car if you came by train. When?”

“Oh—oh, would today week be all right?”

“Surely. Look here, I shall still be in Peterminster then. I’m staying at the *George* for a bit, while we get the demolition work started. I’ll pick you up at the school and drive you to my home, and we’ll come back the same evening. That would be perfectly easy.”

“That would be lovely.”

“Meanwhile, unless you’re on duty this evening, why not let me take you into Peterminster for dinner?”

"No, thank you very much, but I can't."

"You *are* on duty?"

"No, but I've promised to play chess."

"Well, you're not playing chess until after tea. Let's go and have tea in Dorchester."

"Why not at the mill?"

Timothy, thinking of three small girls walking, possibly none too quickly, back to the school, said, "Not the mill. There may be some of your staff there, and I'm not feeling sociable today."

"Oh? I'm sorry I came, then, but you *did* say . . ."

"Of course I did. And when I say I'm not feeling sociable, you know perfectly well what I mean. Besides, you don't give me credit for possessing any manners, do you? I find that surprising and hurtful. I should have thought you knew me better, even upon our admittedly short acquaintance, than to suppose I would embarrass a lady by telling her to her face that her company was unacceptable to me. Apologise at once!"

"Why should I?" She was laughing, and again he was aware of her singular, most individual beauty.

"Because I tell you to. It's about time somebody bullied you for your own good. You get things far too much your own way."

"You wouldn't say so, if you knew everything." The light had died out of her eyes. She was sallow and plain, after all.

"Perhaps I know more than you think," he said quietly.

"Why are you wasting your time with a chap the kids call Simple Simon?"

She flushed again, this time with furious anger and a sense of outrage made stronger by her instant recognition of the justice of the nickname.

"How dare you! How *dare* you!" she said. She suddenly broke down and began to cry. Timothy took her by the shoulders.

"I shall shake you in a minute," he said. "Come on, and get into my car. Big brother talking."

The confident, almost insolent grip of predatory hands too strong and (strangely, she thought) too reassuring to be shrugged off, electrified her. The poetic, almost diffident advances of her lover had not this elemental crudity. Timothy looked into her eyes, dropped his hands, smiled, and said.

"I take it you haven't any big brothers?"

"No," she said, helplessly. "I haven't any brothers at all."

"I guessed it. The assertive and protective nature of brothers is a byword. See any good Border ballad. I'll go first down the stairs and then, if you trip, you can fall on me."

"I don't call you assertive and protective. I call you arrogant and bossy," she said. The sense of outrage was gone. She laughed at her own words and, with a curiously light-headed feeling, followed him meekly down the winding, awkward stair.

"You've missed tea," said the witches' contemporaries, "but we've kept seats next to ours for you at the film."

"Is there to be a film? Oh, goody!" said Sandra.

"Yes, the two tennis finalists were asked what treat they would like, so they said a film."

"I hope it's not a Western. I loathe Westerns. All noise and guns and all those phoney Indians falling off their ponies," said Veronica, who had recovered her spirits.

"It's nice for my people to get the pay," said Connie Moosedeer unemotionally, "but sometimes they ought to let them win the battles."

"What *is* the film, anyway?" asked Sandra.

"I don't know, but any film's a film."

"Didn't you save us anything from tea?"

"Yes. You'll have to sneak into the boxroom and get it. There's jammy buns and some cake."

"Goody. Did anybody—were we missed?"

"Penelope Ward was at the head of our table. She said where were you, so we said Veronica had had a parcel from home and you were having a picnic with her on Top Meadow."

"Fair enough. But didn't Penelope spot you hiding the buns and things?"

"Oh, yes, but she only grinned and said, 'If you're thinking of a feed after lights, Miss Vere Pallis is on duty, so watch out.' Penelope is quite decent, really. Most of the Fifth are. It's the Sixth who are so upstage and cocky. It was two of the Fifth who won the semi-finals and I'm jolly glad of it. The Sixth would have asked for classical music on gramophone records."

Alison Marchmont Pallis was less glad of the film-show. Her game of chess had to be postponed, so that (she reflected) she could have accepted Timothy's invitation to dine with him at the *George* in Peterminster. It would have been preferable to staff supper in the common room. She was tempted to ring him up, but what she thought of as wiser counsels prevailed. Simon met her on the front staircase which, except on certain gala occasions, was out of bounds to the school. He said:

"What are you going to do this evening?"

"I *was* going to play chess with Annabel Vale, but I suppose she'll go into the hall to see the film. All the prefects are on duty on film nights."

"Yes, thank goodness, otherwise we might be dragged in. Where did you get to at tea-time? I looked for you everywhere, but you seem to have disappeared as soon as the tennis was over."

"Yes, I went along to look at my house."

"Whatever for? Anyway, I'd have come with you if I'd known."

"You're becoming adventurous, aren't you?" She smiled ironically. "I'm just as glad you didn't. We should only have argued about it all over again."

"No, I've given up arguing. How long do you intend to stay up after this week?"

"Only a few days. It might be a week, perhaps."

"I shall do the same, then, but we'd better not meet here at school. The servants have long ears and observant eyes. I'll take a room at the *George* for a week. We can meet there all right, with Miss Pomfret-Brown and all the staff and children away."

"Not the *George*. It's far too near the school. Dorchester or Bournemouth would be better, wouldn't it?"

"Well, really, Alison! You pretend you don't mind flouting the conventions by living within three miles of the school and wanting me to stay there with you at week-ends and during holidays, yet you won't let me put up at a perfectly respectable hotel which is farther away. You're not terribly logical, my dear!"

"We may as well stick to the conventions as long as we can, I suppose. You seem to prefer it that way."

"All right, Dorchester, then. I expect the Bournemouth hotels are all booked up by now. You'll come every day, I suppose? I can hardly come here to fetch you."

"Every day except Wednesday, then."

"Oh, why not Wednesday?—or don't I ask you that?"

"Of course you ask me that. It's only that I've got to see this Mr. Herring that day."

"Well, I'll come along. You're meeting him at Little Monkshood, I suppose?"

"Actually, no. He's offered to show me his own house, because that's a conversion, too."

"Oh, I see. And where does he live?"

"Somewhere south of Stroud, up in the Cotswold country. He's picking me up here in his car, and it means an all-day trip."

"I see. What sort of ancient greybeard is he?"

"Now, you two innocents abroad!" said Vere Pallis, with false heartiness. "Stop blocking up the staircase! You can talk your sweet nothings somewhere that doesn't inconvenience other people!"

"How much does she really know?" asked Simon in low tones when he had moved aside to let Constance Vere Pallis pass. "Is she in your confidence? I told you she was dangerous!"

"Don't be ridiculous! And of course I don't confide in her. There isn't any need. She knows what there is to know. I don't doubt that."

"I don't much like it, Alison. Has she said anything to you privately?"

"Certainly not. She would get a hasty, ill-considered answer if she did! She may be my half-sister, but what I choose to do is none of her business."

"She may think it her business to approach Miss Pomfret-Brown."

"Miss Pomfret-Brown is probably far too sensible a woman to take notice of rumours and gossip. If she is not, then I shall resign and live, like the Lady of Shalott, within my four grey walls and four grey towers, except that the towers would have to exist in the imagination."

"And the magic mirror, we'll persuade ourselves, would not exist at all. Well, I hope Miss Pomfret-Brown *doesn't* know about us," said Simon. "That would make the hell of a complication."

"I don't think you know much about P.-B.," said Alison.

"And the ancient greybeard?" pursued Simon. Alison laughed.

The summer term, which, since the end of examinations, had seemed to drag, suddenly rushed to its end. First the school and then the staff dispersed, and the solid, fine

Georgian mansion was left to Alison and the servants. These last were to take their fortnight's holiday in relays. Alison was to go to Corfu at the end of the week and there join Simon, who would travel a day before she did, an idiotic precaution, as she had pointed out to him, since no other member of the staff would be travelling that day or on their plane, and they would, after all, spend the holiday as man and wife, under a name which belonged to neither of them.

On the Wednesday that he was to take her to his home, Timothy called at the school at nine o'clock in the morning to pick up Marchmont, and ran straight into the redoubtable Miss Pomfret-Brown, whom he had not previously encountered but whom he felt he could not mistake.

"Hullo!" she said, abandoning the motor-mower with which she was (quite unnecessarily) showing the gardener how the tennis courts should be cut. "Who're you?"

Confronted by a lady who seemed to be a cross between Miss Margaret Rutherford and Bertie Wooster's Aunt Dahlia, who (according to the saga) if all other sources of income failed, could make a living calling the cattle home across the Sands of Dee, and observing a glint of humour in what could have been a stern and forbidding eye, Timothy decided that impudence would best meet the case. He uncovered in reverent manner.

"I have the honour, ma'am, to be about to abduct one of your ladies and convey her to my home in Gloucestershire."

"I suppose you mean Alison. She's the only one of the staff who's staying up for a bit." She studied him thoughtfully. "Gal's making a fool of herself over that milk-and-water sop Bennison. Why don't she abandon him to that half-sister of hers? Vere Pallis wants him badly enough, and Alison is far too good for him."

Timothy had been expecting a slight passage of arms. His protagonist, he guessed, was always ripe for battle.

What he had not foreseen was that he would be taken into partnership.

"I'm afraid I don't know Bennison," he said, forsaking impudence in favour of carefully-edited truth, "and I have only the slightest acquaintance with Miss Pallis. I'm the secretary of the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest, and I thought Miss Pallis might care to see what I've done with my own house before we do too much to hers."

"Oh, I see. Hoped you were Bennison's rival. Would have backed you, too. What's all this nonsense about Little Monkshood?"

"Miss Pallis has bought it, and my Society is doing it up for her, but we shall have to make a start by pulling some of it down."

"More money than sense, that girl. Oh, well, I suppose she's waiting for you. See you some other time. What's your name?—though I think I can guess it."

"Herring. Timothy Herring."

"Thought as much. Family likeness and the same brand of impudence. Knew your father. Give him my regards."

"Thank you very much."

"Remind him of the time we bathed naked by moonlight in the Cherwell."

"He might not thank me for reminding him of that, ma'am. He's a most respectable party in these days."

"Ah, well, don't you forget that *cucullus non facit monachum*."

"*Eheu fugaces . . . labuntur anni!*" returned Timothy.

"I saw that you ran into our benevolent dragon," said Alison, when he met her in the hall.

"Yes, indeed. She was telling me risky stories about my father."

"*What!* You're joking!"

"No, no. It appears that they were up at Oxford together, pulling the gowans fine. She reminded me that the

cowl does not make the monk and my rejoinder was equally hackneyed but just as much to the point, I thought."

"What did you say?"

"Alas, the fleeting years slip by."

"How did she take it?"

"On the chin, I think. Altogether, she rather surprised me."

"Yes, she surprises the parents, too. Did she say anything else? She's really rather a menace. I can't think why she decided to descend on the school again like this. We thought she'd gone to Morocco."

"She committed to me her views on a certain subject in which she seems to have some idea you're interested."

"Oh, nonsense! She couldn't have done!" said Alison, in obvious panic. "You couldn't have been with her for more than three minutes."

"The geese on the Capitol managed it ever so much quicker than that."

"What did she tell you?"

"Don't sound so agitated. Only what anybody who had the merest superficial knowledge of you could guess. She spoke in somewhat slighting terms of a gentleman I have christened Mr. Rochester. Here's my car. Jump in."

"She didn't *really* mention Simon?" asked Alison anxiously, when they had taken the Shaftesbury road. Timothy concentrated on his driving. "Well, did she?"

"In words of one syllable, yes, she did," said Timothy, seeing no way of avoiding an answer to the breathless question.

"So she knows!"

"I have no idea whether she knows, or what there is to know. Is it supposed to be a secret?"

"I'm in love with him. He's married."

"Yes?"

"His wife is in a mental home."

"It seems to be the old, old story."

"Is that meant to be as horrid as it sounds?"

"Not knowing your Mr. Rochester, I can't say. Your revered boss referred to him as a milk-and-water sop. She is obviously the spiritual mother of her school. The charming children—"

"Take me back!"

"And run straight into the far-seeing and unsympathetic Miss Pomfret-Brown again?"

There was silence. The car ate up the miles.

"Say you're sorry," said Alison at last.

"My dear girl, I merely asked a simple question."

"It was an abominable question. And I'm twenty-nine."

"And feeling every minute of it, I don't mind betting."

"Yes, I am, if you want to know."

"Right. I'll stop at the next likely-looking pub and buy you a drink and myself a refreshing snort of bitter lemon, and then we'll both feel younger."

"Do you really not drink when you drive?"

"I try to study my passenger. I feel that you will feel safer if I stay on the wagon."

"I didn't realise that you studied my feelings at all."

"All right. I apologise. What do you think of Miss Pomfret-Brown as a judge of human nature?"

"You're going to have to apologise again in a minute."

"You're afraid to answer the question."

"Of course I'm not. I don't *choose* to answer it, that's all."

"Are you normally an entirely truthful person?"

"Except when I'm telling the girls at school how inexpressibly shocking I find their conduct, when, really, I don't find it shocking at all, and behaved far worse when I was their age."

"Well, that's an entirely truthful answer, so you pass with full marks. Why doesn't Miss P.-B. approve of your young man?"

"Only, I suppose, just because, being a fine musician, he's rather sensitive and not enough of an autocrat or a humorist to manage the girls."

"Translated, I suppose that means he can't maintain the standard of discipline to which Miss Pomfret-Brown is accustomed. I don't suppose any man could."

"Well, his classes *are* a bit more than he can cope with. The girls take advantage of him."

"He should put the hussies across his knee. That 'ud learn 'em."

"They'd probably adore him if he did that, whereas now they only play him up. It's a healthier attitude."

"And do you adore him, or do you play him up?"

"I don't do either. In any case, it can't be any business of yours."

"No, it isn't, but don't you agree that it's rather fun to mind other people's business? Anyway, I love minding yours, and I wouldn't mind betting that poor old Rochester is as described by the intelligent young. Besides, I'd take Miss Pomfret-Brown's word about people, prejudiced though it might be, long before I'd take yours, and I've got two good reasons for saying so."

"Is it any good to be angry with you?"

"Well, yes, in a way. You're so good looking when you're angry that the temptation to provoke you is more than I can resist."

"Oh! Well, I dislike compliments. They are always insincere. So I'm not going to be angry any more. I suppose there's no reason why I shouldn't discuss Simon in a rational way, but I don't care to do it, that's all."

"I understand."

"I'm quite sure you don't!"

"Oh, but I do. Nothing like rational discussion of an idol to reveal the feet of clay. You were asking me for my reasons for preferring Miss P.-B.'s estimate of your Simon to what appears to be your own. You simply are no judge of

character. You're a nit-wit when it comes to sizing people up."

"Being rude will get you nowhere. It's very little-boy to try to make people angry with you."

"I'm not being rude. I'm talking sheer, obvious, down-to-earth commonsense. Look here, now, I'll justify my assertions. You confuse pity with love. You're sorry for this Simon chap, that's all. You know in your inner self—you're not a fool—that the man is a washout and a nincompoop. You were silly and wrongheaded enough to take up with the family pest, my cousin April, for the same idiotic reason. You underestimate Miss Pomfret-Brown . . ."

"I don't!"

"Let me finish. Finally, and far and away worst, you don't like *me*. Well, what have you to say to all that? One thing at a time now. Speak slowly, quietly, and in English, measuring your words and replying to each criticism in turn, giving special attention to the last one."

"As to the last one," said Alison, "I don't suppose Katharine liked Petruchio much—at first." To her horror, she found that she was blushing.

CHAPTER TEN

Reconstruction

It was almost the end of the summer vacation.

"Miss Pomfret-Brown knows about Simon and me," said Alison to her half-sister, "so, thanks for the warning, but I'm afraid it's no use to me at all."

"How do you know she knows?"

"Timothy Herring told me."

"Timothy Herring? How does *he* know anything about it?"

"He's the man—well, one of the men—responsible for converting Little Monkshood. Miss Pomfret-Brown told him she knew."

"Told *him*? Does she know him, then?"

"Well, apparently she knows—or used to know—his father."

"But what made her tell him?"

"What makes her do any of the unaccountable things she does?" demanded Alison, determined that Vere was not going to be told the real reason, Vere, however, did not need to be told. She said:

"Miss Pomfret-Brown thinks Simon's weak. Is that what she told this Mr. Herring?"

"How should I know what she told him?" cried Alison, cornered, but determined not to surrender. "What I can't imagine is how on earth she knew."

"I found it my duty to tell her. That's why I've just warned you to give up the association."

"*What!* Oh, Constance, you never did so beastly a thing as that!"

"I couldn't let it go on, Alison. I'm some years older than you, and I've always made you my responsibility."

"Of all the impertinence! *When* did you tell her?"

"When I gave in my notice, at the half-term. I felt that somebody responsible should know, as I was no longer going to be here to keep an eye on you."

"I could—I could . . .! Oh, what does it matter? I've known since the beginning of the holiday that she knew, and she hasn't said a word to either Simon or me. But, if you knew she knew, why have you left it until now to warn me? I did not know you could be quite such a snake in the grass!"

"I can't help your thinking hard thoughts of me, Alison. Believe me, I meant everything for the best. After all, we shared the same father. Well, goodbye. My taxi's waiting. I'll write to you from Newcastle and let you know how I'm getting on."

"Goodbye, then, Constance. I hope you'll be happy in your new job—not that I think you deserve to be!"

"Try to get over the hard feelings, my dear. I suppose you spent the holiday with Simon, as usual? It will be the last time. I *really* think I acted for the best."

"I might believe *that*, if I didn't know that you have made more than one attempt to appropriate Simon for yourself."

"Oh, nonsense, Alison! That weakling would never appeal to me. Well, I must fly, or I shall miss my train!"

Alison watched her out of the window and saw the taxi drive away, then she began to rearrange the volumes in her bookcase. She had been back at school for several weeks. Simon, as usual, had been able to manage only a fortnight on Corfu, and, for once, it had seemed to Alison not only long enough, but too long. Simon, in his ineffectual way, had been as chivalrous and (in his own opinion, which, for the first time, she did not share) as ardent as before, but he no

longer satisfied her. He was too deferential, too considerate, too unnaturally restrained to be anything (she faced her conclusions firmly) but a bore.

She told herself that she was unappreciative, ungrateful, uncomprehending. She went further, and called herself a bitch. She knew that he was disappointed in her reactions. Even to his eulogistic appreciation of the weather and the scenery of the magic island, she had returned but halfhearted support.

"What's the matter, Alison?" he asked one evening, when, having dined at nine, they were standing on the balcony of their hotel gazing out towards the small island formed when the ship of Odysseus was turned into a rock which now almost closed the entrance to the lagoon. Sometimes it seemed to him that his mad wife was like this island, almost shutting him off from the wider human contacts represented to him by the Mediterranean end of the Adriatic Sea and the mountains of southern Italy.

"The matter?" She did not turn to him, but continued to gaze into the distance. "Nothing. Tomorrow, let's go to the Vecchia Fortress."

"Why?—not that I don't want to, but why?"

"They say there are marvellous views of the sea and the islands from the high terrace there. Sometimes you can even see the mountains of Turkey. They seem such a lovely long way off from here. Do you remember when we stayed in Istanbul, and saw the Greek prostitutes going into the rich houses dressed in their diaphanous pink nightdresses? I almost envied them."

"My dear woman! You know, Alison, there *is* something wrong with you this holiday. You're not a bit like your usual self."

"I'm sorry. It's just that I haven't shaken off school yet, I expect."

"You've always shaken it off before."

"And I shall again. You'll see." She managed to turn to him and smile. "Cheer up, Simon. It'll be all right tomorrow."

"I want it to be all right all the time. I want every minute to be all right. We shall be back again soon enough in that hell."

And now, sure enough, they were back, although her hell, which was that she had fallen out of love with him with the same inevitability as a sleeper wakes from even the most delightful or even the most fearful of dreams, was not the same as his, for in hell, it may be assumed, there are as many mansions as in heaven. His particular hell was his inability to maintain school discipline. It worried him and it shamed him. It took precedence over the frustrations and vexations of his marriage, even over the hell of giving up to his classes and his private pupils the time which he felt ought to be dedicated to his musical compositions and the book he was writing on the art of fugue.

Yes, they were back. They had been back in England for six weeks or more, and now he was standing in the history room and Alison was saying that there was something she ought to tell him.

"I suppose you mean it's all over between us," he said. "I guessed as much on Corfu, and since you've come home you've done nothing but hang about at that horrible house of yours, watching the workmen take it down. I suppose you've been there again this afternoon."

She was not prepared to challenge the truth of this, nor even the bitterness of his tone. Since their return to Monkshood Mill she had seen very little of him, for she had made a habit (telling herself that she ought to take an interest and, in any case, had nothing much else to do) of walking the three miles to Little Monkshood and watching the process of demolition. Sometimes Timothy was there, usually with Parsons, but twice he was there alone.

"Well," he said, on the first of these occasions, "Joshua fit de battle of Jericho, and de walls came tumbling down."

“Is it the battle of Jericho?” she asked. Although nothing but the lightest or the most impersonal conversation had passed between them during the few hours which she had spent at his Cotswold home, she was uneasy in his company although she longed for it and felt a disappointing sense of flatness if she arrived at Little Monkshood and did not find him there.

“Oh, yes, it’s the battle of Jericho, I think,” he said. “Joshua couldn’t take the city by direct assault, you see. It took the sound of the trumpet to breach the defences.”

“Do you always talk in riddles?”

“That isn’t a riddle,” he said, looking at her. “Is it?”

“How am I to know?”

“All right. Call it a riddle, if you like. Perhaps you found the answer when you went to Greece. Which part?”

“I went to Corfu.”

“And what could be better? Don’t forget your speargun, will you, next time you go?” Alison laughed.

“I don’t like killing things,” she said. “How did you know I like underwater swimming?”

“I didn’t, but I thought it was a thing one did on Corfu. Does Simon swim?”

“Why have you stopped calling him Mr. Rochester?”

“Does Simon swim?”

“I’m not . . .”

“To quote the classics: *Don’t tell me a lie, for you know I hate a liar.* Now then!”

“How dare you!” But she was blushing and laughing.

“You were about to tell me that you are not going to Corfu with him ever again.”

“Well, I’m not, as a matter of fact.”

“Why not? Much cosier than travelling alone. But perhaps you mean that you’ll choose some other Atlantis, some other island in the Hesperides?”

“There aren’t any others.” Abruptly she turned away from him and walked the three miles back to the school. It

was there she found Simon waiting for her.

"I thought you'd got a piano pupil this afternoon," she said.

"I know. She cried off. Her mother has a relative staying there who wanted to take the child out."

"Well, I suppose it's almost the end of the holiday for them. The boarders begin coming back tomorrow."

"I know. All hell let loose for the next ten weeks or so."

"Poor Simon!"

"Vere is starting her new job about now, I suppose. I must say it's a weight off my mind, knowing that she won't be here with her everlasting snooping and spying, and her—her overtures to me. You know, dearest, I might think about week-ends at Little Monkshood after all. We could be careful and so forth, couldn't we?"

"I suppose so, if you really feel you can risk it."

"It's no good being sarcastic. I've been living on the edge of a volcano all these years. I suppose you felt the same."

"No, I don't think so. Anyway, before you commit yourself too far, there is something I ought to tell you. I haven't mentioned it before, because I didn't want to spoil the rest of your holiday, but you'd better know."

"Know what, Alison?"

"Miss Pomfret-Brown knows that we've been rather more than friends. It was Constance who told her."

"Good Lord, Alison! What do we do about it?"

"Be discreet and provoke no gossip, I suppose, is what you would suggest."

"Is there any chance of . . ."

"Being dismissed our posts? I hardly think so. She has known since half-term, and the new term begins in two days' time. Everybody is back except Mademoiselle, who never tears herself away from her family in Paris until the very last minute, and there don't seem to be any new faces

in the common room, so apparently we are not to be dispossessed at present."

"My word, we shall need to be careful!"

"So it's still to be hole-and-corner, is it? I might just as well not have bought the house at all, but I've been thinking *that* for some time. I see now that it was madness."

"Well, my dear, I didn't ask you to buy it, did I?"

"No, you've been against it from the first. But, Simon, don't you see that nothing will happen?" P.-B. knows. What of it? She has her remedy if she chooses to use it, and it seems she does not choose."

"But if it came to the notice of the parents . . ."

"She might be forced to take action, although I doubt it. She's a law unto herself, and I can't imagine that anyone would be allowed to dictate to her."

"No, perhaps not. Oh, Alison, it's only you I'm worried about. A woman's reputation . . ."

"In these days?"

"Besides, I have my wife to think of."

"It's rather late in the day to begin thinking of her, isn't it?"

"That's an unkind thing to say, and unworthy of you."

"Perhaps it's unfair, too. I'm sorry."

"You are stronger than I am, Alison."

"Well, I should hate to be weaker. Look, we're free agents until term begins, and I haven't a thing to do. Come with me to Little Monkshood tomorrow and let's see how they're getting on. *That* can't compromise you, can it?"

"Oh, hullo!" said Timothy, when they arrived. "Come and look at your lovely roof. We're thrilled to bits with it."

Marchmont introduced Simon. "How do you do? Are you also an addict?" He summed up the undernourished body and the sensitive, charming face. Philip Bosinney, not Mr. Rochester.

“Not particularly,” said Simon, with his nervous smile, “but Alison wanted me to come along, so here I am.”

“Does Alison get everything she wants?”

“Of course she does,” said Alison. “Mind how you come up the stair, Simon darling. In the classic expression, it’s plaguey dark.”

On the first floor an amazing and exciting transformation had taken place. The grimy Victorian ceilings had disappeared and the steeply-pitched roof was now to be seen in all its primitive grandeur of tie-beams, purlins, scissor-braces, rafters, sprockets, and crown-posts.

“We’ve had to put in rather a lot of new timber,” explained Timothy, as they stood in the great hall and gazed upwards, “but it’s all well-seasoned wood and we made the builder use bow-shaped principal rafters in the closed truss and the gables to give the thirteenth-century effect. Come and look at your solar, Alison, because that’s the part of the house you’ll use most.”

“This hall looks tremendous, after the pokey little subdivisions I remember,” said Alison.

“The undercroft is pretty impressive, too, don’t you think?—and magnificently gloomy now that we’ve removed the kitchen windows and opened up two of the bricked-in original slits.”

“How soon can I move in?”

“Not as soon as I’d hoped. You’ll have to give us at least another six to eight weeks, I’m afraid, but you can have your Christmas dinner here for certain. We’ll have it all swept and garnished by then.”

“Well, Alison,” said Simon, “it’s a wonderful showplace, but I don’t see how you’re ever going to live in it. For one thing, it’s an ice-house. I’m chilled to the bone already, and we’ve only been here half-an-hour.”

“Ah, but there’s no heating installed yet,” said Timothy. “All the same, I do rather agree with you, as I’ve told Miss Pallis more than once. If I were she, I’d make Little

Monkshood a summertime residence only, and stick to my present quarters from the end of October until May. But then, I like my creature comforts, / do."

"The lovely hooded fireplaces look as though they'd provide warmth enough," said Alison, "but I can't see myself dragging great hods of fuel up the newel stair from the undercroft to keep them fed. I'm glad I'm to be allowed to use electricity."

"We're keeping the Victorian entrance to the undercroft until the last possible moment, simply for the convenience of the workmen," said Timothy. "Then it will be blocked in and the only entrance will be on the first floor, at the top of the outside stone stair, the way you came in today. You'll have to be very careful in slippery weather, although we're giving you a stone balustrade. It's going to be a bit like that of the Archbishop's Palace at Maidstone, but not so elaborate, of course. One comfort, you don't seem to get our Cotswold winters down here."

"Well, it's all extremely interesting," said Simon, for the second time looking at his watch. "I'll have to leave you to it, Alison, unless you're ready to come away now. I have a pupil—Mrs. Watkin's daughter. She hasn't had a piano lesson for weeks, and I promised faithfully I would go along this afternoon. Good-bye, Herring. I trust we shall meet again. Are you coming, Alison? There is really not much point, I suppose, as I shall have to leave you again almost immediately."

"I'll stay here a bit longer, then. There are all sorts of questions I want to ask."

"Very well. I shall see you at school supper. Mrs. Watkins always gives me tea, so I shall be all right until then." At the Victorian door to the undercroft he left them.

"So that is your Simon," said Timothy. Alison glanced at him sharply, but his eyes were innocent and his tone uncritical. "How old would you say he is?"

"I know how old he is. He is forty-two, and I suppose," she added bitterly, "that *you* would call him a failure. That's because he has nothing in the world except what the school pays him, and the few pounds he picks up by taking private pupils, like this wretched Watkins child."

"My dear," said Timothy gravely, "I could never call anyone a failure who had won your esteem and regard. And that's not a compliment," he added hastily. "It is a sincere tribute to a very lucky man."

"You embarrass me," said Alison simply.

"Do I? So long as I have *some* effect on you I am perfectly satisfied. By the way, I've found you a chap who will reduce the garden to law and order. What do you propose to do with the rest of the estate? It's a bit rough and ready, but there's quite a lot of it. I'd suggest chickens and pigs if I thought you would be fond of either, but I don't somehow think you would. You could sell some of the land to a speculative builder, perhaps, if you can get planning permission. It doesn't look much good for agriculture, so I'm pretty sure you could."

"I shall have to think about it. I don't want a builder to have it, though." She was thankful that his mood had turned pedestrian. "Thank you very much for finding me a gardener. That really *will* be a help. And, of course, Simon is fond of gardening," she added. "I daresay he would like to come along at week-ends."

"Ah, yes," said Timothy pleasantly, easily detecting the lie. "A very helpful idea." He received another sharp glance, but continued, unperturbed, "You'll find you can do with company, especially at first. By the way, we haven't taken down that elm at the back of the house, because, now we've demolished the hideous wing, the tree is far enough away from the windows not to shade them, and we had a forestry chap down and he says it isn't dangerous, but we can root it up if you like."

"Do you usually root things up?"

"Yes, if they get in my way."

"That sounds rather ruthless."

"No, no. I have an essentially kindly, sympathetic nature. I wouldn't wish you to misunderstand me."

"I neither misunderstand nor underrate you, Mr. Herring."

"Timothy. Do you always call Mr. Rochester 'darling' in public? I should have thought (judging only, of course, by what you've told me) that it might be a tiny bit rash."

"Stop calling him Mr. Rochester! I hoped you'd given that up!"

"Why? He has all the Rochesterian attributes save one."

"I am not going to ask you which one, because it will only give you a chance to be offensive."

"Not only one, now I come to think of it. More like two."

"He isn't masterful."

"I noticed that."

"No; he is a kind, scrupulous, and chivalrous person, unlike some others I know."

"These wasted opportunities!" said Timothy. "My heart bleeds for the gentlemanly fellow. Let's go up to the hall floor again and I'll show you what we've done with the buttery and pantry. I'm sure you're going to like them, and the medieval kitchen, too."

"Better, I hope, than I like *you* at this particular moment. However, I want to see everything I can while I'm here, because I suppose I won't be coming again for some time. Six to eight weeks seems a long while to wait. I *did* hope I could move in before November."

"I know. I was far too optimistic. The gardener chap can make a start, though, if you wish. We've done all the throwing down. It's reconstruction work from now on and, apart from the workmen's dump, you'll have all the garden you need, but it's certainly impossible for you to take up residence yet. You could put in an occasional Saturday afternoon or Sunday, of course, if you cared to order wood

and coal. The fireplaces are all right, and the gardener is willing to bring up the fuel if you can let him know when you want it, and so long as you don't want it after he's finally finished work in the garden."

"Well, thank you for taking so much trouble, Mr. Herring."

"Timothy. And now may I give you tea at the mill? I suppose dinner at the *George* is out of the question. You'll be wanting to get back to school supper and hear how little Miss Watkins is progressing with her scales."

"I couldn't care less how little Miss Watkins is progressing with her scales. I don't want any tea, and dinner at the *George* is *definitely* out of the question. Will it be all right if I put a carpet down in the solar?"

"Oh, yes, of course, but I should leave the hall floor as it is, because that will have to be shown to the visitors, and they'll scuff up a carpet in no time. That's it, then. You go first up the stair."

"So that, if I trip, I can fall back on you?"

"What an unkind metaphor," said Timothy, "Anyway, even if you haven't tripped, I receive the definite impression that you've stubbed your toe."

"Don't be ridiculous!" She led the way. Timothy showed her how far the kitchen, buttery and pantry had been reestablished now that the party walls in the great hall had been taken down and the screens and their passage restored, and then he said:

"We've re-opened the other newel stair, you see. It goes down to the undercroft like the other, and I think you'll find it's the more convenient of the two."

"Why didn't we use it instead of the other one, then?"

"Because it's been blocked up so long that I want to be sure it's quite safe. You have noted, I hope, the care I keep taking to ensure that you don't break your neck."

"It's extremely kind of you," she said ironically.

"Oh, one believes in taking care of things one hopes to inherit one day, don't you think?"

"Your name," said Alison, trying to keep her tone light, "is not St. John Rivers, by any chance, I suppose?"

"No. Nevertheless I effect the cure of souls."

"Well, you can leave mine alone! I don't approve of the missionary spirit."

"Of course," said Timothy smoothly, changing the subject, "in a house so comparatively small, the kitchen and the hall may have been all in one, or the kitchen may even have been an outside building with brewhouse attached, but we thought it would be more fun to give you the full manorial treatment, so to speak. It's possible because the hall here runs the full width of the house with the solar built out to the west of it. The kitchen is on the small side and it's quite likely you'll find, when your land is cleared, that it's worthwhile to let the County Archaeological Society loose on it to see whether the kitchen *was* a separate building, but, of course, if it was, and was made of wood, as they often were, all trace of it may have gone."

"I can't understand you," said Alison.

"Well, either the thirteenth-century kitchen was an integral part of the present building . . ."

"That is not what I meant, and you know it! I mean, you are so sensible and nice one minute, and so unutterably silly and rude and boring the next. That's what I don't understand."

"I cringe under those cruel words. Good heavens, it's nearly six o'clock! By the time we reach the *George* the bar will be open."

"Not *we*."

"Not? Then I shall be compelled to gate-crash my friend Miss Pomfret-Brown in order to tell her that you won't allow me to take her advice."

"What advice?"

"I'm not sure I ought to tell you. You won't permit me to know you well enough for me to be able to share with you the confidences which have been exchanged between Miss Pomfret-Brown and myself. Of course, in casual chat over the dinner-table at the *George*, there is no knowing *what* I might disclose."

"I should hate you to betray P.-B.'s confidence, so the answer is still the same," said Alison firmly.

"A pity. A great pity, as the cowboy said when he tried to rope a steer and strangled the boss. My revelations would have turned your lustrous eyes to shooting stars."

"I prefer them as they are," said Alison.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hallowe'en

Time passed. The third week in September became the last week in October. Watched with covert interest and excitement by seven pairs of eyes, April Bounty continued, so far as her health was concerned, to flourish like the green bay tree. It was noticeable that her tongue had lost its sarcastic bite and that, from her lips, unkind nicknames had become a thing of the past, but of her immediate demise there was no sign at all. The spell, it seemed, had failed.

"Three boos for Sandra! She's mucked up the curse," said Gillian. "I vote we blackball her out of the gang. I'll be the leader, if you like."

"*You?*" said Sandra contemptuously. "Anyway, if anybody mucked it up, it was Veronica. She turned yellow and wouldn't say the words or stick the pins in."

"We've got to give it time," said Connie Moosedeer. "You British are so impatient. You're like babies. *My* tribe will wait for months, maybe for years, before they'll give up and begin to think nothing is going to happen. It was a good spell, and it's sure to work in the end."

"If it doesn't, we'll try another," said the leader, eyeing the forthcoming Gillian with dislike.

"We can't go to that house again," said Stephanie. "The workmen are all over it. When we were out for a ramble with Miss Betts to pick autumn leaves and berries, Mavis and I managed to sneak away up that lane and have a look. The

house is being all done up and the garden's been dug over and everything."

Little Monkshood, in fact, was rapidly becoming ready for occupation. On the morning of the day when the school was preparing for its Hallowe'en celebrations, Alison received a letter from Timothy. She had seen nothing of him since the beginning of the term. He had divided his time between his own home and the hotel at Peterminster from which he visited Little Monkshood to see how the work was progressing, but he did not go there at week-ends, during which work stopped. He wrote:

"Glad to be able to tell you—although I daresay you may have noticed it for yourself—that Little Monkshood will be ready if you'd care to move in before Christmas. The house has been wired for electricity and piped water is laid on. We've done much better than I expected, and I do hope you'll like the place when it's finished. Don't be afraid to complain to us if you find anything that doesn't please you, so it might be an idea to go along at any time now to give the alterations the once-over and see what you think.

"You'll find the undercroft very cold, but we've kept coal fires going in the solar and the second chamber, so those should be all right, but if you prefer not to move in until the spring it might be more comfortable for you. Anyway, I've left you a couple of electric fires which you can switch on when you go to look things over."

He sent his kind regards to Simon, under that name, and remained hers sincerely. Alison threw the letter on to the common room fire, although why it had upset her she would have found difficult to explain. Meanwhile, there were the horrors of Hallowe'en to be faced, for although Miss Pomfret-Brown did not insist upon staff attendance in the hall on this Walpurgis Night, the senior staff thought it a duty and the junior staff an obligation (on the strength of catching the boss's eye) to be present.

Sandra, fearful of losing her authority over the non-success of the spell, called a special meeting of the coven immediately after tea.

"I'm not going to mess about with turnip lanterns and bobbing for apples in a bowl of water," she told her followers. "This is the night when graves give up their dead. I dare any of you who aren't afraid of ghosts to come with me to the churchyard. Any offers?"

"Witches, yes. Ghosts, no," said Connie Moosedeer. "And if you call me a coward I shall sock you, Sandra Davidson."

"Suppose nobody wants to go with you, Sandra? said the timid Veronica. "shall you go there alone?"

"You bet!" said Gillian scornfully. "She's only calling for help because she funks to go by herself."

"Oh, yes?" said Sandra dangerously. "Well, *is* anybody coming with me?"

"We'll be missed from the hall," said Mavis. "Besides, there's always a special supper at Hallowe'en."

"There's always a special pig inside your beastly fat stomach," retorted the leader. "All right, then. If you're all such suck-babies, I *will* go there by myself."

"Hark who's talking!" said Gillian.

"You'd have to go at midnight if you were to see anything," said Stephanie, "and I shouldn't think even a lunatic like you would want to be all by yourself in a churchyard at midnight, especially at Hallowe'en."

Feeling that her prestige was beginning to be undermined, Sandra said boastfully.

"You'll see. The only thing is that, if I go alone, you won't believe me. You're all afraid, so you think I'm afraid, too. Well, I'm not. What proof do you want that I've been?"

"There isn't any proof," said Connie Moosedeer.

"Please don't go, Sandra," said Veronica. "But—if you do, I'll go with you."

"Oh, don't be such an ass, Veronica," said Gillian.
"You're only trying to show off."

"She's worth the lot of you, anyway," said Sandra. She linked her arm in that of the selfless one. "Come on, Veronica. Let's plan."

Gillian followed them with burning eyes.

"I bet they don't go anywhere *near* the churchyard," she said.

"I vote we follow them when they go out, and see how far they get."

"If Sandra says she'll go, she *will* go," said Connie, "but I bet Veronica calls it off at the last minute. She's chicken. Anyway, you can count me out."

"And me," said Mavis. "I'm not going to miss Hallowe'en supper, even if she does call me a pig. There's going to be chicken sandwiches and a real claret-cup, so I heard some of the Fifth saying."

"I'm not going, either," said Stephanie. "It's much too cold, and we'd be expelled for sure if we were caught."

"All right, I'll go after her by myself," said Gillian.

"Says you!" observed Mavis. "When was *your* name Sandra Davidson?"

"I'll go with you," said Caroline, "if you promise we won't go into the actual churchyard."

"We won't need to. Sandra won't go anywhere *near* the churchyard. *You'll* see. She'll just go as far as the front gates and hang about a bit, and then come back."

"Well, if you're really going, we'll cover up for you if we can," said Connie generously. "I only hope it isn't Marchmont who spots you're not at supper."

"Oh, we shan't miss supper," said Gillian. "We shall simply jump out on Sandra and Veronica and scare them into a fit."

It was unlikely in the extreme that Alison would miss the delinquents. Having put in an appearance at the revels for the best part of an hour, she retired to her room and, having

changed her party glad-rags for a tweed costume and a heavy coat, she slipped out of the house to meet Simon. On that particular afternoon school lessons ended at three and she had waylaid him as he was preparing to leave for his rooms in the village.

"I know you don't approve of my living at Little Monkshood," she said, "but I heard this morning that it's almost ready for habitation. Will you get some cocktail snacks and a bottle of something—anything you like—and meet me there for an hour at about half-past seven this evening? I do want you to be the first to be with me for a house-warming, and then I'll give an official one for the senior staff nearer Christmas."

"Must it be tonight? Wouldn't it be better to go in daylight tomorrow?"

"Anything to get away from the Hallowe'en party for a bit. That's why I want to go tonight."

"Oh, I see. Very well, then. Can you drink advocaat?"

"Get that for yourself and some madeira for me."

"You drank advocaat at Vere's birthday party, didn't you?"

"That's not to say I like it."

"Well, I do."

"Very well. At about half-past seven, then."

Having posted his letter in Peterminster, Timothy stayed the night at the *George*, intending to pay another visit to Little Monkshood after tea on the following day in the hope that curiosity would take Alison to see it at the earliest opportunity. He deduced that this would be some time after lessons finished for the day and school tea was over.

He had a couple of keys to the newly hung, sturdy, nail-studded front door at the top of the outside stair, and these he intended to hand over at the first opportunity, preferably personally. He drove in the gathering dark to the house, let

himself in, switched on the electric fire and a light in the solar, and seated himself in the window recess. He intended to give her until about seven o'clock. After that, knowing nothing about the Hallowe'en party, he decided that she would not be likely to venture forth, and so he would drop the keys in at the school secretary's office and return to the *George* for the night.

It occurred to him, at the end of a quarter of an hour, that, as the key she had to the now bricked-up ground-floor entrance was useless, and she had, as yet, no other, it was in the highest degree unlikely that she would turn up. On the other hand, if she had not visited Little Monkshood for some time, she might not realise that she could no longer get in without the new key. Then he remembered that the electric light, shining out through the uncurtained window, would show her that someone was there. He had no desire to go and sit in his car, for the night, although fine, was chilly. He shook out the newspaper he had bought in Peterminster and made himself as comfortable as he could manage on the broad oak window-seat.

He had reached the house at half-past six. By seven o'clock he had read the paper. He then took out a ball-point and settled down to work out the crossword. Not knowing the mentality and personal idiosyncrasies of the setter, this took him some little time, and when next he looked at his watch it showed twenty minutes past the hour. It seemed useless to wait any longer. He switched off the light and the fire, made his way to the only door which now, between the great hall and the kitchen, gave egress from the house, descended the outside staircase and was soon edging his car into the lane and on to the Dorchester road, half hoping he might meet Alison on the way.

He had almost reached the church, a bare half-mile from the school, when his headlights picked out a solitary man carrying a couple of baskets. He slowed down to pass

him, for the road was narrow, and recognised Simon. He pulled up and offered him a lift.

"It's very good of you," said Simon. "These bottles are rather heavy."

"Hop in. How far do you want to go?"

"I'm going to Little Monkshood. Miss—er—Miss Pallis has invited me to drink to its health or something. She says it's ready for occupation."

"Yes, she would have had my letter this morning. I've just come from there, so she hasn't arrived yet. How will she be coming? On foot?"

"Oh, yes, there's no other way, as she hasn't a car."

"Well, what about turning round, going to the school, and picking her up? Save her a three-mile walk, what?" Timothy was uncertain whether he would prefer to see Alison in Simon's company or not at all.

"That's very kind of you," said Simon. They saw Alison as she was leaving the school gates.

"You must come in and have a drink, Tim," she said, when the car drew up outside Little Monkshood. "We shan't stay long. I just wanted Simon to be the first one to see the house. Is it really finished?"

"Near enough. You can bring in the furniture and fittings as soon as you like. By the way, here are the new keys, so now you can let yourself in, and feel that you're really the owner. No, I won't come in. Never drink when you're driving. Don't hurry. The car will wait."

They stayed barely half-an-hour. Timothy gathered that it was not a very cheerful house-warming. He could sense Simon's resentment and could sympathise with it. He felt somewhat frustrated himself, and was thankful when they dropped Simon in the village and he was driving Alison back to the school.

"I'm sorry to have been an involuntary gate-crasher," he said. "I take it that I intruded upon what was meant to be a tête-à-tête."

"It was nice to get a lift," said Alison evasively. "Have you had your dinner?"

"No, but I've plenty of time. It won't take me ten minutes to get back to the *George*."

"Come in to school and eat a Hallowe'en supper."

"You don't mean you're a truant from the revels?"

"Well, I wasn't absent for long, and I'm not on duty this evening, anyway."

"Wasn't your Simon invited? I thought he was a member of the staff."

"He could have come if he'd wanted to, but he doesn't care for our social occasions, and I can't say I blame him. Girls merry-making in the mass are rather grim."

"Not to me. I can't wait to renew my acquaintance with Miss Promfret-Brown. Did you know her name was Sabrina?"

"What *are* you talking about? Slow down. We're almost at the school gates."

Timothy stopped the car.

"It's a fact," he said solemnly. "She used to sit with my father under the glassie, cool, translucent wave, in twisted braids of lilies knitting the loose train of her amber-dropping hair. Oh, sorry! I forgot you don't like quotations from the classics—or isn't Gerald Gould a classic?"

"That's an unmannerly, uncalled-for question, and I think you're rather beastly. I know I gave myself away, but nobody except you would cast it up at me."

"Why have you been avoiding me since you came back from Corfu?"

"I haven't been avoiding you, and Corfu would have nothing to do with it if I had."

"Oh, dear! Didn't it come up to expectations? I'm sorry about that."

"Are you coming in to supper, or are you not?"

"On second thoughts, not, but I'll drive you up to the front door, and kiss the wall's hole."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"Dear me! Short on Milton and unfamiliar with Shakespeare! Where *can* you have been brought up?"

"Your name isn't Pyramus!"

"No, it's Phisbe. Joke, Lower Fourth for the use of."

He turned the car in at the school gates and drove at a funereal five miles an hour up to the front door.

"Goodbye, Mr. Herring, and thank you for bringing me home," she said, primly, a hint of laughter in her voice. Timothy got out, went round to her side of the car and opened the door for her. Ceremoniously he handed her out. Much less ceremoniously, but with sincerity, he said, "If only you'd have a bit of sense!" She thought it might be better not to ask him what he meant, but discovered that she needed all her self-discipline to keep the question from being spoken. Timothy watched her mount the well-lighted steps, then he climbed back into the driving-seat and backed the car to the open gates at the end of the drive.

Alison was about to push open the front door—it was not shut fast until ten—when it was opened by a couple of small girls.

"And where do you think *you're* going?" she enquired, her school-mistress eye taking in the fact that, although their overcoats barely concealed the fact that they were in party frocks, they had changed into stout brown-leather walking-shoes.

"Oh, we—er . . ." began Caroline.

"We got hot, and thought we'd get some fresh air, Miss Pallis," said the less abashed and more resourceful Gillian.

"Oh, yes? Well, it doesn't need walking-shoes to stand on top of the steps outside the front door, but I'm glad to see that you're well wrapped up. That was very sensible of you. Now, take a few good breaths, and then inside with you. If you get hot again, I would recommend a cooling-off process in your form-room, where you might care to write me an essay on *Hallowe'en: its origin and superstitions*."

"Oh, Miss Pallis!"

“Well, get along with you this time, and no more nonsense. You won’t see any more ghosts in the garden than you will in the building—not as many, perhaps, if half the stories about the Purfleet ancestors are true. Is supper over?”

“No, Miss Pallis.”

“Well, I hope you’ll enjoy it. Now take off those outdoor lendings and back to the ballroom with you.”

A combination of circumstances had caused Sandra to put forward the time of her visit to the churchyard. On Hallowe’en Night, as a very special concession, and as it was half-term, the Fifth and Sixth were allowed to stay up until after midnight if they wished to do so. That meant that there would be seniors about until, probably, one o’clock in the morning. Added to that, the front door would be locked, and as the only other means of admittance which was reputed to be safe was by way of one of the terrace windows, of which the catch could be pushed back with the blade of a penknife, Sandra changed her plan, as there might be mistresses and the resented Sixth about as All Saints Day came in.

Sandra explained all this to the trembling Veronica and the sceptical Gillian and Caroline.

“So we’re going at eight and I daresay we’ll be back in time for supper, so you needn’t save us any,” she concluded. At ten minutes to seven she pulled Veronica out of a queue which was about to bob for apples.

“Sneak up to the cloakroom and put on your overcoat and outdoor shoes,” she muttered. “Zero hour! As soon as you’re ready, meet me at the front door. In all this row, nobody will notice us leaving, if we slip out quickly.”

“Oh, but, Sandra, I’m ever so sorry, but I can’t go with you.”

“You dirty little stinker! Why not?”

“It isn’t my fault,” said the wretched Veronica. “Sally Fenwick asked me to go into supper with her, and you know

she's our form prefect, so I couldn't say no, could I? All the seniors ask a junior to sit with them at supper on Hallowe'en—you know that!—and then we have to pull their chestnuts off the hot-plate for them afterwards. Hasn't anybody asked *you*?"

"Yes, that fat idiot Wanda Kerr in the Fifth. As though I'm going to be a catspaw for *her*!"

"You didn't tell her that?"

"No, of course not. I said, 'Honoured, I'm sure,' but that doesn't commit me to anything. Anyway, she knew it was cheek because she said she jolly well hoped I'd burn my fingers getting the chestnuts for somebody else, and she only asked me because she thought, with *my* amount of nerve, I'd probably scrounge her more than her share. I can just see myself! But, Veronica, you've jolly well *got* to come. You said you would, and you've got to stick to it."

"Sandra, how can I? You know what Sally's like. She's frightfully nosy and tough. She'd find out where I'd been, that's for certain sure, and then where should we be?"

"We may be back in time for supper. I don't know quite how long we'll be. If we're not back, well, I suppose anybody can make a white-livered goody-goody, like you, confess to *anything*! All right, don't come, then, but look out for my vengeance if you're going to let me down!"

"Oh, Sandra, I would come if I could, but I simply can't risk it. Supper's at nine, you know."

"You'll be sorry, and don't you forget it!" Five minutes later she had slipped out by the front door, noticed by nobody but Gillian and Caroline, who were only waiting for their cue to follow her. She trotted along on the grass to the big gates, although it was unlikely that, with the noise and the laughter coming from the Hallowe'en party, anybody would hear her footsteps on the gravel, and then turned on to the high road, keeping well in the shadow of the hedge, for there was moonlight. Before supper ended she was back,

and was squeezing into the place left beside the fat and spectacled Wanda.

“I—we were playing ghosts and I got shut in one of the built-in cupboards,” she explained, when Wanda wanted to know why she had come to supper so late.

“You seem to have had a scare,” said Wanda, when, with visibly shaking hands, Sandra pulled out the chestnuts later on.

“Yes, well, it was horrid being shut in like that,” said Sandra. “I wondered if I’d suffocate. Do you mind if I eat the next chestnut myself? I’m going to, anyway.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Witches' Curse

"Well, tell us about it," said Gillian. "I bet you didn't go to the churchyard."

"Why didn't you come with me, to make sure?"

"We planned to follow you up," confessed Caroline, "and see if you really went there."

"You filthy sneaks!"

"Only Marchmont came *in*, just as we were going *out*."

"She was pretty decent about it," admitted Gillian. "We told her we were just coming out for a breath of air, but I think she spotted our outdoor shoes. Anyway, come on. Tell us all about it, and we'll believe as much as we can."

"You'll believe it all," said Sandra fiercely. "Because it will all be jolly well true. I got as far as the churchyard, but I didn't go inside the gate. I didn't have to."

"You didn't *dare* to, you mean."

"I don't mean anything of the kind. I'm going to be absolutely truthful, cross my heart, so I'm not sure whether I really *would* have gone into the churchyard or not. I *think* I would, but I can't be sure."

"Thinking isn't doing."

"Who said it was? Otherwise beastly old April Fool would be in her grave by now, with a stake of holly driven through her heart."

"That's vampires."

"Well, she *is* a vampire. She battens. She battens on *us*!"

"She hasn't been nearly so bad this term," said Mavis. "Almost decent, in fact. And she hasn't called you Cuckoo Egg once."

"Be *quiet*! That's not funny. It never *was* funny and it never *will be* funny, so stop your silly sniggers or I'll pull your silly hair!"

"All right, no offence, and, anyway, your freckles don't show so much in the winter."

"Be *quiet* about my freckles! And if you want to hear what I've got to tell you, you'd better stop interrupting, because my parents are coming at twelve to take me out to lunch in Peterminster."

"Jolly well wish mine were! What's the use of half-term if . . .?"

"Shut up and listen. Well, I sneaked out to the big gates and turned towards the village. I hadn't gone far when, under the lamp outside the mill house, I saw a woman. Her back was towards me, and she was walking very fast, and I was glad of that, because I didn't want to pass her."

"Why not?" demanded Gillian.

"Because I was wearing my school overcoat and hat, of course, silly."

"Well, how was she to know you ought not to be out?"

"I thought it was Marchmont—you know, tall and thin—and then I recognised her walk—this woman's walk, I mean—and it was different."

"It couldn't have been Marchmont. Oh, well, yes, I suppose it could. She must have been out, because she was coming in when she met us at the front door," said Caroline.

"It wasn't Marchmont, *it was a ghost*," said Sandra impressively.

"Tell us another bedtime story!" jeered Gillian.

"This isn't a story; it's the truth. When she got to the last lamp in the village—you know, where that side road meets the Dorchester road just this side of the church—she stopped and looked round as though she thought she was

being followed, and I saw who it was—only it wasn't *her*—not a living, breathing, human being. I mean to say, it *couldn't* have been!" Sandra had dropped her voice. "Then, the next minute, she had disappeared."

"Well, she would," said Connie Moosedeer. "She was lost to sight in the darkness. You said it was the last lamp in the village. Once she'd got beyond that, of course she disappeared."

"It was moonlight. Well, she disappeared into the *churchyard*, and when I looked over the wall I couldn't see her, and there wasn't a *sound*, except the wind in the trees. It was so beastly that I turned and ran back to school."

"But who was it? It *could* have been Marchmont," argued Mavis. "You said you *thought* it was. I expect she went out to meet Simple Simon. I know she's sweet on him, because I went back to her form-room one afternoon to get a book I needed for history prep, and—well—"

"Oh, everybody knows about Marchmont and Simple Simon," said Gillian contemptuously. "I expect Marchmont's too old to get anybody decent, so she has to make do with *him*. Get on with the fairy-tale, Sandra."

"It *isn't* a fairy-tale! If you don't believe me, you can jolly well go away while I tell the others. It wasn't Marchmont. *It was Vere!*"

"But it couldn't be Vere!" cried Stephanie. "She's hundreds of miles away, right up in Northumberland."

"It *was* Vere, I tell you. That's to say, it was Vere's ghost. It disappeared into the churchyard, like I told you. And you know what *that* means! She must be dead!"

"I expect her school has half-term, same as us," said Veronica timidly, "and she's come down here to see Marchmont."

"Then why didn't she call at the school, as she was so close?" demanded Sandra. "*And why the churchyard?*"

"I never liked Vere," said Caroline. "I bet she was up to n.b.g. and when she thought you were following her she

dodged into the churchyard to let you go by."

"She disappeared, I tell you!"

"Of course," said Gillian loftily, "it's a good enough story to explain why you daren't go into the churchyard yourself. Personally, I wouldn't talk so big about churchyards and things another time, if I were you."

"I don't believe in ghosts," pursued Caroline. "I mean, I wouldn't like to sleep in a haunted room, or anything like that, but that's because you imagine things, and that's beastly, but do you know what I think?"

"No, and don't want to," retorted Sandra. "And you've jolly well *got* to believe in ghosts, because I *saw* one, I tell you, and it was Vere Pallis."

"What I think," said Caroline, unimpressed by her leader's logic, "is that you saw the real Vere Pallis, like Veronica said. I bet she was sacked from our school. She was a nasty, slimy worm, and I bet Miss Pomfret-Brown and Miss Salter found her out in something and sacked her, and now she's come sneaking back to get her revenge. We ought to keep our eyes open, that's what I think, and save the school from its dreadful fate."

"You need to have your head looked at," said Gillian. "What dreadful fate? What do you think you're talking about?"

Meanwhile, with the help of Miss Salter, when that busy and oppressed chief of staff could spare the time, Alison was furnishing Little Monkshood, and a fortnight before the school was due to break up for the Christmas vacation she had given out invitations for a Saturday evening party.

"And you've got to come along on Saturday morning and help me get things ready," she said to Simon, at the end of Friday morning school. "I can't send girls to order gin and so forth, and I can't get away to do the ordering myself. I've promised to help Hildegarde Salter with the Christmas

play rehearsals. And could you get to the house some time on Saturday morning to take the stuff in?"

"Not Saturday morning. I've got private pupils until twelve. I'll tell you what, though. I could get there soon after one, and take a picnic lunch along. Could you join me there? I'll tell the off-licence people and the caterers to leave the goods outside the front door, and then, if you let me have a key . . ."

"Oh, Simon, what a good idea! There are drinks left from the last time we were there, so we need not open the party bottles."

"It would give us a chance to be together for an hour or two before the others come. Nobody will think anything of it, if there's the party to follow. Who are coming, by the way?"

"The senior staff and Miss Pomfret-Brown, of course, and I've asked the architect, Mr. Parsons, and his wife, and, of course, Mr. Herring."

"Herring? Do you have to ask *him*?"

"Well, considering that, but for him, Little Monkshood would never have been renovated and restored, I could hardly have avoided inviting him to the official opening, could I?"

"I hope you haven't asked Vere."

"No, I haven't. I don't suppose she would want to make the journey, anyway."

"I'm still afraid of Vere, Alison."

"Afraid of her?"

"She could do us a great deal of harm."

"She can do no more than she has tried to do already, and you know that she did not succeed. She went to Miss Pomfret-Brown, and you know what came of that—nothing. Constance cannot hurt us, Simon."

"I'm not so sure. She is evil, bad-hearted through and through."

"Yes, she takes after her mother, I suppose."

"You never knew her mother, did you?"

"No, of course I did not. How could I? Vere was six years old when my father—her father, too—married my mother, and I was born two years later."

"Did she—did she persecute you when you were a child?"

"She did not get the chance. I was well looked after when I was very young, and by the time I was old enough to be sent away to school, Constance had left and was studying in America. I did not see her again until my mother died, and Constance came home again. By that time I was well able to take care of myself, although I admit it was rather a shock when I found that we were both on Miss Pomfret-Brown's staff. I had no idea that Constance was applying for the science post at the same time as I was applying for the history."

"I wonder what *she* thought about it?"

"She affected to be very pleased, and it was not until you came into my life that I realised she was the same person whom I had so much disliked when first she came back from America."

"Yes. Alison, you haven't grown to dislike *me*, have you?"

"Oh, Simon, of course not! Whatever makes you ask such a thing?"

"Only that you seem such a long way off these days. Is it because I won't come and stay at that house?"

"No, of course it isn't. I was crazy to think of such a thing."

"At all events, the fact you thought of it meant that, at the time, you did want me, but now you seem to hold yourself aloof. I suppose—I suppose you do still care?"

"Of course," she said perfunctorily, her eyes, which had been looking into the past, returning to his.

"Corfu wasn't very satisfactory, was it? Not to either of us, I'm afraid."

"I suppose we've arrived at the stage of taking one another for granted. People do, you know."

"All passion spent, I suppose. You seem unapproachable. It isn't because I'm not enthusiastic about Little Monkshood, is it?"

"I'm not as enthusiastic myself as I was at first."

"And you think it's my fault, but you don't see my point of view. You can afford to throw your cap over the windmill. I can't. My salary is a good one, considering that I'm only a visiting teacher, and I don't want to risk losing it. If I had to depend only upon my private pupils, I could hardly live. You know how heavily I have to pay for the nursing home."

"Must we have this all over again? It would be perfectly fair, considering what our relationship has been, for me to help with the fees, and you know how you loathe your private pupils, and the school, too. You would be better without both."

"What our relationship *has been!* That's the trouble, isn't it? Alison, why have you changed? You used to frighten me because you expected so much more than you discovered I could give, but now you frighten me because I think we're growing apart from one another. Oh, Alison, don't desert me! There is nothing in my life but you!"

"Of course I shall not desert you. What do you think there is in *my* life?" She spoke with unintentional bitterness.

"I know you're disappointed in me. I believe you thought we could live together as man and wife at Little Monkshood, but we can't. For me, too much is at stake."

"I see that. Let's think no more about it. Half a loaf is better than no bread, they say, and I suppose that's what we've got."

"But a woman of your temperament would rather starve than accept the half-loaf. Is that it?"

"Nobody would rather starve, Simon."

Timothy, allowing himself plenty of time, for there was snow in the Cotswolds, arrived an hour early at Little Monkshood. Tom and Diana Parsons had stayed a couple of days with him and it had been arranged that they should travel with him in his car and leave their own in his garage.

The winter darkness had set in long before the car reached Little Monkshood, and it did not surprise Timothy to see the light streaming from the splendid window of the solar.

"Thank goodness we can get in," he said. "I was afraid we'd have to sit in the car until somebody came." He ran up the outside stair and pulled at the iron chain which rang the bell. He waited and then rang again. As there was still no answer, he turned the heavy, church-like handle of the door. It was not locked. The latch lifted, and he called out through the narrow aperture he had opened, "Anybody at home?" His voice boomed in the narrow passage between the stone-built screens which separated the kitchen regions from the hall, but there was no response from anybody inside the house. He returned to the car.

"Alison must have gone back to collect her party and left the lights on," he said. "I propose we wait inside."

There was a switch just inside the doorway. It lit up the screens passage and turned on the wall-lighting in the great hall. Alison was lying face-downwards on the floor of the hall. She had been dreadfully sick and, when he lifted her up, he thought at first that she was dead.

"No, she's still breathing," said Diana Parsons, "but we ought to get a doctor to her. I suppose this place is not on the telephone yet? Go in your car, Tim, and make somebody come along at once. Tom, get some drinking—water. She may be glad of it when she comes to. Wring out your handkerchief in some more, so that I can clean her up a bit before the doctor gets here. Don't worry, Tim. I think she'll be all right. Food poisoning, I imagine, but she's been so sick that there can't be much left inside her."

Thankful, not by any means for the first time in his life, for a woman capable of coping with an emergency, Timothy went for the doctor and brought him back to Little Monkshood. He was still in the house when Miss Pomfret-Brown and her party arrived. Timothy explained what had happened.

“Then where,” demanded Miss Pomfret-Brown, “is Simon Bennison? He should be here by this time. I know he was invited, and, no doubt, would have arrived before the rest of us, matters between them being what they are.”

Timothy had not given a thought to this aspect of the case. His sole concern had been for Alison. Alarmed by Miss Pomfret-Brown’s words, he went into the solar, to find Simon’s dead body on the floor.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Stool-Pigeon

Timothy knelt beside the fallen man. It did not take long to make certain that Simon would never move or speak again. The doctor had gone, driven by Tom Parsons in Timothy's car, to telephone for an ambulance to take Alison to hospital. She was still unconscious. Diana hovered over her, although there was nothing more to be done until the ambulance arrived.

Timothy went back to Miss Pomfret-Brown and Miss Salter, who were standing near the foot of Alison's bed, a brand-new divan which had been brought in only at the previous week-end.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Bennison is worse off than Alison."

"How much so? Is he dead?" Miss Pomfret-Brown asked. Timothy, relieved by the direct and pointed question, answered,

"Yes. Do you think you could bear to come and look at him? As the doctor isn't here . . ."

"You'd like a second opinion. Very well. Stay here, Hildegard. No need for you to come to a harrowing scene."

The doctor returned before the ambulance arrived and Timothy, having told him the news, joined Tom Parsons.

"This is a nice business," he said. "What on earth am I going to say to Alison when she recovers?"

"How do you think it all happened?"

"Goodness knows. There's food on the table in the solar, and the remains of some drinks. Something wrong with one

or the other, obviously. I didn't touch anything. I suppose it means the police, as Bennison has died."

"Accident, I suppose?"

"I don't know. I should imagine it must have been, but he was a weak sort of character, I'm afraid, so it may be suicide."

"Then what about Alison?"

"I don't know. I can't see her attempting suicide, somehow. She's sensitive and nervous, of course, but she isn't a weakling, even though I think she may be the type that thinks the world well lost for love."

"*Did* she love him?"

"Yes, worse luck!"

"Here comes Miss Pomfret-Brown."

"And here's the ambulance, I think."

Marchmont was taken away.

"The police will be here soon," said the doctor, when he had supervised her removal. "I hope, Mr. Herring, you did not touch anything when you found Mr. Bennison dead? In these sort of accidents the police have their definite routine and dislike any kind of interference with their investigations."

Miss Pomfret-Brown and Miss Salter joined the conference.

"We were invited to a house-warming party. I did not realise that the Borgias had been invited, too," observed the headmistress. "I suppose the gal will recover?" She addressed this question to the doctor as though he were at fault.

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that. Lucky for her the stuff, whatever it was, made her so sick. Oh, yes, I'm pretty sure she'll be all right. Has she any relatives? Might be as well to let them know what's happened, just in case."

"There's a half-sister. I'll let her know at once." Miss Pomfret-Brown again stared fixedly at the doctor. "Don't like the sound of you," she said. "You ain't trying to pull the wool

over our eyes, I hope? The gal ain't in any danger? After all, poor Bennison's dead. Any idea why? I mean, he's been poisoned—that's obvious—but who did it?"

"The police will be here soon," replied the doctor. "It *is* some form of poisoning, no doubt about that."

"You mean poison was introduced into the food deliberately? I always thought that man might choose his own *quietus*, you know. Typical. But he had no right—no right whatever—to try to take Alison with him. Anyway, I suppose she *will* be all right? Men were deceivers ever, and I've never trusted you doctors to tell the truth. *Is* she going to have a relapse? Be quite straightforward."

"No, no, she'll pull through, but get the half-sister to come along, all the same. She'll want to visit her in hospital."

Vere Pallis was not at a boarding school, so there was no answer to the call which Miss Pomfret-Brown deputed the school secretary to put through. An attempt on the following morning was successful and Vere arrived at Purfleet Hall two afternoons later, having stayed one night in London, as was reasonable.

"I called at the hospital on my way here from the station," she said, "but, of course, there was nothing to be learnt. You know what hospitals are."

"I expect you made too much fuss," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "Hospitals are all right if you treat them right. Did you see Alison?"

"No, they wouldn't let me. So much red tape! Said she was not on the danger list and that it was not in visiting hours."

"Well, if she's not on the danger list, surely that's something to be thankful for," said Miss Salter, who was present.

"Timothy Herring is staying on at the *George*," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "I expect he'd like to see Alison, too, as he's

mixed up in this business. I'll get him to go along with you. He's got a car."

Summoned to the presence, Timothy found himself thanked by Vere for saving her half-sister's life. He was subjected to a flat, lifeless, monotonous voice. There was no resemblance here to Alison, nor in the pinched mouth and cold yet avid eyes.

"Good heavens, I didn't save anybody's life," he said, astonished. "All I did was to send for a doctor."

"In time! In time! That is the point. If Alison had been left there helpless and unconscious . . ."

"That will do, Vere," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "No need for histrionics. If Timothy Herring had not been there, some of us were to turn up and would have done the same as he did, and only very little later. No point in being melodramatic about it."

"If you could have got in," said Constance.

"Herring got in," rapped out the redoubtable headmistress.

"Yes, I suppose he had a key." The tone had an unpleasant significance. Timothy grinned. He did not trouble to explain that the door had been on the latch.

"You argue in circles. Why shouldn't he have a key? He has been in charge of the work there. Don't make molehills. You might trip over one of them yourself," snapped the headmistress.

"I am not likely to be hoist by my own petard, if that is what you mean, Miss Pomfret-Brown," said Vere Pallis sourly.

"Now, Timothy Herring," said the headmistress, ignoring this observation, "we want to know exactly what happened when you got to Little Monkshood. Don't be squeamish or beat about the bush. Nothing is gained by delicacy. What had Alison been up to, eh?"

"Eating and drinking with Simon Bennison, I suppose."

"What did they have?"

"There were some bottles of gin, some vermouth, some sherry—these were unopened and, I suppose, were for the party. There was also a bottle of advocaat which was three parts empty, and about three-quarters of a bottle of madeira. I also noticed some cocktail snacks and sandwiches, but I'm not sure whether they had been touched—probably left until the rest of us turned up."

"You seem to have noticed quite a lot," said Constance Vere Pallis, in the same spiteful tone."

"You left my half-sister lying there on the floor while you made an inventory of food and drink, did you?"

"No. Mrs. Parsons and I got her on to her bed and then I went for the doctor. Then something was said, so I went to the solar. I found Bennison's body. When I did so, I knew it would be a case for the police."

"That sounds as though you had thoughts of foul play."

"No," said Timothy, giving her a very level stare. "Foul play was not in my thoughts at all, and I can't see why it has occurred to you. But when one person has been violently sick and then sunk into a coma, and another has died, it's just as well to let the proper people take over. There will have to be an inquest, in any case. No doctor, under the circumstances, could possibly give a certificate."

Vere turned to Miss Pomfret-Brown.

"I have to get back to Newcastle. They will expect me. It's not as though my sister is dead. I must see her at some time today. Do you think it's of any use to try the hospital again?"

"I'll ring them myself, my dear. You realise the poor gal may still be unconscious. She may not be able to speak to you or recognise you."

"I just want to see her."

"Of course. I'll go and call them now at once, and they'll tell me when you can go. There's no earthly reason why you shouldn't take a peep. Timothy will go with you."

While she was out of the room, the two left in it avoided one another's eyes, so, without looking at him, Vere said, "Does Alison mean anything to you?"

"In what way?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake! In what way *does* a woman mean anything to a man?"

"I hardly know your half-sister—certainly not as intimately as you appear to suppose."

"A likely story, when you've been down here for months doing up that house for her!"

"Look," said Timothy gently, "you've had a beastly long journey and a bad shock. Let's not quarrel. There's no point in it, and you'll only find it exhausting."

"She said you were impudent and lively. I can guess what *that* means!"

"She misjudged me, as you perceive. Miss Pomfret-Brown, in her inimitable way, has laid down the law, but do you *want* me to accompany you to the hospital?"

"I'm not sure that I'll be going to the hospital. If Alison is doped out, there doesn't seem much point."

Miss Pomfret-Brown reappeared.

"It is all arranged," she said. "They'll let you have a peep, Vere, but you've got to control yourself. Now, be off, both of you, and I shall expect you back to supper, then Vere can catch the 8.23 from Poole tomorrow morning and go to London. There she can get a train to Newcastle and return to her duties. I shall let you know of any developments, my dear, but I'm sure it's going to be all right. Off you go. Now, Timothy Herring, take good care of her."

"My car is outside," said Timothy. "We can be at the hospital in half-an-hour." It was a silent drive. Timothy was glad of a chance to look in at the hospital. Vere was glad of the transport his car afforded and of the reassurance of his presence, much as she disliked him. Timothy gathered that she had made a scene at the hospital on her previous visit,

and was dubious of his ability to stand surety for her good behaviour on this occasion. However, all was well. They were shown immediately into the private ward for which he had stipulated, and, with the Sister hovering, he and Vere gazed at the motionless head on the pillow. Alison, white-faced and with black-circled eyes, was breathing normally. There was one moment of complete silence. Then Vere Pallis suddenly shouted, "My God!" The next instant she had fled from the room.

The news of Simon's death could not be kept from the school, for the reporters could not be kept away from it, either. Sandra called a meeting of the coven.

"I'm going to Miss Pomfret-Brown," she said. Her small face was so pale that the freckles on it looked almost black. Her eyes were red and swollen. The others were silent. It was the day of Simon's funeral. The only mourners had been Miss Pomfret-Brown accompanied by the other man on the staff of the school (a Mr. van Goos who taught fencing and turned up once a week for this purpose) and one or two mothers of Simon's private pupils. Of flowers there were sufficient not to cause comment. Miss Pomfret-Brown had sent a personal wreath in addition to that sent by the staff, the school servants had contributed, as had the school governors, the school itself, and the mothers aforesaid. Timothy, having no standing, did not attend the funeral service, but, after some doubts, had weighed in with a modest spray which bore the card: *From Alison, with love*. As the churchyard was no longer used for burials and the cemetery was nearly six miles away from the school and so out-of-bounds, he did not anticipate that school-girl tongues would wag over this inscription.

The school, which, with youthful callousness, had hoped for a half-holiday, was unpleasantly surprised to find that lessons would continue as usual except for a two-minute

silence at twelve, the approximate time of the lowering of the coffin. Sandra's call to the coven had come, therefore, during the dinner-hour which followed this ceremony.

"I don't wonder some of the Lower Fourth cried," said Gillian, breaking the awkward silence which had followed Sandra's announcement. "They ragged him much worse than we did."

"What do you mean—you're going to Miss Pomfret-Brown?" asked Mavis, although they all knew well enough what was in Sandra's mind.

"They'll put us in prison," said Stephanie.

"It wasn't *our* fault Mr. Bennison died," said Caroline, uneasily. "It wasn't meant for *him*."

"No, it wasn't meant for him," reiterated Veronica. Sandra turned on her in a fury.

"It's all your fault!" she said. "If you hadn't backed out and let us all down, the spell would have been all right! *You've* gone and killed Mr. Bennison, and perhaps Miss Pallis too! You're the black sheep and the scapegoat and—and everything, and you ought to go out into the wilderness and get lost!"

"Let's put a spell on *her*!" said Gillian, whose aim at the moment was not vindictive. She was merely anxious to remove from her leader's mind the fatal urge to confess their sins to Miss Pomfret-Brown, that substitute in their tiny world for God. "Yes," went on Gillian, eyeing the flinching novice. "That's it, then! Let's put a spell on Veronica, and serve her right for being a sissy coward and a brain-washed sow-lizard."

Veronica went white.

"But you'd be murderers!" she said, her lips dry and her eyes terrified.

"We're murderers now—at least, *you* are," said Caroline. Not always Gillian's adherent, she was at one with her now in being prepared to do anything to divert Sandra's thoughts from the suicidal idea of confessing to Miss Pomfret-Brown

the awful nature of their rites. Veronica gave a despairing glance from face to face, but met with no response except a glare of condemnation. She put her hand to her mouth, gave a wailing cry, and fled from those accusing eyes.

Returning at a quarter to one from other, more respectable rites, those of the funeral service, Miss Pomfret-Brown was astonished to find a small girl waiting at the door of her private wing.

"What on earth are you doing here?" she demanded, peeling off black kid gloves. "This ain't your part of the house. Can't have you children here!"

"I—I want to tell you something!" blurted out Veronica.

"Go and tell it to Miss Salter. Don't come to me with your troubles."

"But they're going to kill me, like—like we killed Mr. Bennison! You've *got* to listen! You've *got* to!"

Hearing the voices, Miss Pomfret-Brown's personal maid opened the door.

"Ah, there you are, Mason," said her employer. "Child's beside herself. Take her to the sanatorium and have some food taken to her. See her when I've had my lunch. Exhausting affairs, these funerals. The vicar gave us half-an-hour of poor Simon's virtues. Can't think what he knew about them. Poor fellow was an atheist, so far as I know. Most of these boneless types are. Takes tremendous willpower to swallow the Apostles' Creed, don't you think?" The maid bestowed an appraising rather than a compassionate look upon the sobbing Veronica.

"Having been brought up chapel, madam, I could hardly say," she replied.

"No, I s'pose not. Well, take this little sniveller out of my way. Brace up, child. Nothing's as black as it's painted. Been using your imagination, that's all. Now eat a big lunch, there's a good gal, and then this afternoon you can tell me all about it."

"What shall I say to matron, madam?" asked the maid.

“Say to matron? I don’t care what you say to matron.
Take the child away and tell them to give her plenty to eat
and a glass of wine and water with her dinner.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Confessional

“You’ll have to deal with this yourself,” said Miss Salter, after her headmistress had passed on the details of Veronica’s confession. “It’s extremely serious.”

“No, no, my dear. You tackle it. Treat it simply as a matter of breaking bounds. Ignore all the rest of it. When you’ve reduced the naughty little fatheads to pulp, I’ll have them to tea in my quarters and get them to tell me all about it. We’ve had outbreaks of Ban the Bomb and the Flower People, but witchcraft, so far as I know, is new as a school activity.”

“You’ll only make the little sillies feel important, and that’s the last thing we want.”

“But I’d like to hear all about it.”

“Very well, you shall, but not, Miss Pomfret-Brown, by word of mouth from the girls concerned. You may be a financial genius—I believe you are—but you don’t know the first thing about child-psychology.”

“Disagree with you there, but you carry on in your own way. I’ve always left the discipline of staff and girls to you, my own behaviour equally with theirs, so I give you a free hand in dealing with these intelligent little mugs. I exempt from the category the pathetic blubbering half-wit who came to me and blew the gaff. She certainly is not intelligent. I suppose that’s why the others found it easy to use her as a stooge.”

"They lacked the wit to realise that, under pressure, she would break," said Miss Salter grimly.

"They'll live and learn."

"If you took my advice, you would ask Sandra Davidson's parents to remove her. She has a bad influence."

"I wouldn't say that. What has she done? Lived dangerously. Wouldn't we all, if only we dared?"

"She has led other girls into wrong-doing."

"No, into fairy-tale doing. These babes are still at the fee-fi-fo-fum stage."

"James Sprenger and Henry Kramer would not agree with you, I'm afraid," said Miss Salter, with a slight softening of her attitude which she signified by smiling.

"Oh, those painstaking Fathers who formulated the great fifteenth-century attack on sorcery! The *Malleus Malefi-carum*, wasn't it? Yes, but the *Malleus* pre-supposes a belief in the Devil."

"And not a bad belief, either," said Hildegarde, grimly.

"Oh, come, now! You wouldn't go back to the days of burnings and tortures, would you?"

"Of course not. But it wouldn't hurt for us to be drastic in our treatment of these wretched children, if only to show them that it doesn't pay to behave as Devil's disciples."

"But they haven't done so. If you refer to the work in question, my dear gal, you will observe that it lays down four points which indicate a pact to serve the Devil. First, a witch must renounce the Faith. Is there any evidence that our young friends have done so? Then, one must pay homage to the Prince of Darkness. Eh? Thirdly, unbaptised children must be offered to him. I can't really think . . ."

"All this is beside the point, Miss Pomfret-Brown."

"Fourthly, there is the indelicate association with *incubi* and *succabi*. I think maybe Sandra is a little young for that. *Incubi* it would be in her case, of course. Still, I suppose she has attained the age of puberty."

"You're making a joke of a very serious matter."

"A pity Matthew Hopkins did not anticipate my attitude, don't you think?"

"You seem to be well versed in your subject."

"You, too. Can it be that we have become tarred with Sandra's brush, and have taken pains to do some required reading? Dinna fash yersel, my dear. Run along and give them the edge of your tongue, then set the little naughties something distasteful to do, and let's have an end of the matter."

"But if they've really taken it into their heads, as you tell me they seem to have done, that they killed Simon Bennison and nearly killed Marchmont Pallis . . ."

"Treat the whole thing as a breach of school rules and leave all other considerations alone. Don't you see that the very fact their plan miscarried will do more than we ever could to persuade them that the whole thing was a pack of nonsense? Pernicious nonsense, maybe, I grant you, but nonsense, all the same. I've never believed in using a sledgehammer to crack nuts, though sometimes I'd like to box ears."

Hildegarde was not a member of the Roman church, neither would she have dreamed of associating herself with the medieval theory that confession must be extorted, at all costs to the accused, before sentence can be passed. However, her conception of punishing the coven, after she had spoken severely about the iniquity of breaking bounds and of sneaking out under cover of darkness, not to mention house-breaking (which, she reminded them, was punishable by law) was to order the children to sit in separate classrooms on the next half-holiday and write a detailed account of the proceedings which had led to the formation of the society for the liquidation of April Bounty (not that she mentioned her by name), and a further account of what had taken place at Little Monkshood at the first and subsequent meetings of the coven.

"And you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," she added sternly, at the end of her diatribe.

"Some hopes!" muttered Sandra.

"Did you speak, Sandra?"

"I said I hope we shall, Miss Salter."

"For your own sakes, so do I. After I have read your essays, I also hope that there will never be any need to refer to the matter again."

"What I want to know," said Sandra, when the coven had forgathered in break, "is what *really* went wrong. It's no good you hanging on to us, Veronica. You're blackballed out, you dirty little sneak."

"But, Sandra, you said *you* were going to Miss Pomfret-Brown. I—I only did it to save you the trouble and—and to get the blame myself."

"Liar! You ratted on us."

"No, really, Sandra, I didn't mean it like that."

"As a matter of fact," said Gillian, "Veronica did what you were afraid to do, so there! Why don't we blackball Sandra?"

This matter was still under dispute, Caroline and Mavis supporting Gillian, Stephanie and Veronica (who was learning fast) in favour of Sandra, and the inscrutable Connie Moosedeer remaining sardonically aloof from the discussion, when came the afternoon of the next day. This happened to be the mid-week half-holiday. Hildegard assigned each culprit to a classroom and left a prefect in charge.

"Terribly sorry you've got to give up your 'half' to sit in here, Terry," said Sandra cheekily to her gaoler.

"Don't worry about that," said the prefect. "I'm glad of the chance of getting on with my work, so you've probably done me a favour. And now shut up and go to it. You've got until half-past four, and I don't want one single solitary cheep out of you until then."

“Very well, Terry,” said Sandra meekly and, bending to her task, she headed her paper, *How I Made a Pact with the Devil and What Came of It, by Sandra Millicent Clio Davidson*, and settled down to enjoy herself. Not yet had been discovered the way to fickle Tammias Yownie, and Sandra, ignorant of the quotation, was aware of the fact. It proved, in the upshot, however, that Miss Pomfret-Brown had the ace up her sleeve.

“I’m afraid you’re in for a sticky time,” said Timothy. “They will want to argue that it was a suicide pact. You’ve Vere to thank for that. She seems to have lost her head a bit and told the police that you weren’t a murderess. To substantiate this extraordinary bit of careless talk, she appears to have blown the gaff on you and Bennison to no small extent. I wouldn’t have told you this if I could have helped it, but I haven’t any option. You’ve got to know what to expect when they resume the inquest.”

“Yes. Thank you, Tim. Constance does appear to have done her damndest. I suppose she meant well. She always says she does.”

“The way to hell . . .” said Timothy cheerfully.

“Miss Pomfret-Brown told me about Simon’s death.”

“Yes? She told me you knew.”

“She said somebody had to tell me, and she was the best person because she loved me. It’s a good thing somebody does.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have wanted *me* to tell you,” said Timothy. Alison ignored the obvious innuendo, and went on:

“I think she knew, though, that I’d worked it out for myself. I realised he must be dead, because nobody spoke of him until she did. If he’d been taken to hospital, like me, they would have mentioned it, and if he was all right he would have come to see me. It was easy enough to work out that he was the lucky one.”

"From his point of view, perhaps he was, but not from yours, Alison, so stop talking like that!"

"How do you know my point of view? What is there for me after this? I can't go back to school. Even Miss Pomfret-Brown will have to see that, and there will be enough publicity to close all other schools against me, whatever happens at the inquest."

"You're not dependent upon having a job, so why worry?"

"But what shall I do without one? And what shall I do without Simon? He began by being my lover, and he finished up by being my good works, and now I haven't either."

"Good works are the resort of those who can't justify their existence in any other way."

"Do you think we have to justify our existence?"

"I don't. *You* seem to."

"No, it's just that I felt I had let Simon down pretty badly, and I had to do something about it."

"And did he concur? 'To be thy bedesman now, that was thy knight?' That sort of attitude?"

"He didn't know I'd changed—well, I'm not sure whether that's true. No, it isn't. After Corfu he'd begun to guess."

"I see. If it isn't an embarrassing question, why had you changed?"

"I don't know, Tim. Would you be dreadfully bored if I told you about Simon and me? I wouldn't dream of it, only—well, the thought of this resumed inquest is a bit of a nightmare. I can't think of very much else. I want to get my mind clear before I have to face the Coroner. I keep asking myself whether Simon *did* commit suicide, and whether, if he did, he intended to take me with him."

"Well, I didn't really know him, of course, but, from what I saw of him, I shouldn't have thought he was the type. I mean, the impression I got was that he was an ineffective sort of bloke who *might* have thought of suicide for himself

(although I doubt it very much, because he wasn't in despair, or anything approaching it, so far as I could make out), but I'm positive he'd never have dreamed of arranging for anyone else's death, especially without that person's consent. He was essentially considerate and decent."

"That's what I think, but the fact remains that he died and I nearly did. Tim, what will happen to Little Monkshood now? I couldn't possibly live there after this.

"No, I quite see that. When you've made up your mind about things, I expect I can get Phisbe to buy it from you, if you don't put the purchase price too high."

"I'd accept any offer they cared to make me, even the token payment of a hundred pounds I made them for the work they did."

"They'll be fair enough, so that's one thing settled. You were suggesting you should tell me about yourself—you and Bennison. Do you really want to, do you think?"

"I want to get things clear before they question me in court."

"Not a bad idea, at that. Fire away, and I won't interrupt. Stop when you've had enough. Don't tire yourself."

Alison had been discharged from hospital and she and Timothy were in Miss Pomfret-Brown's private sitting-room which the owner had loaned to them for an hour.

"You'd better be the one to brief Alison about this inquest business," the headmistress had told him. "A villain like you will be able to give her some pointers which a decent citizen like myself would never think of. You can have my sitting-room. Nobody will disturb you there."

So there they were, one on either side of a pleasant fire. Timothy picked up the poker, caught Alison's eye, and put it down again.

"You'll spoil it if you poke it," she said. "I don't know why men can never leave a fire alone."

“Instinct to prod a good thing into flame,” said Timothy, with a return to the flippant manner she recognised, and an insinuation which she recognised equally well.

“Yes, I suppose it began like that with Simon,” she said. “Or perhaps I was the one who did the prodding. I don’t know. It began six years ago, when he first came to the school. I’d been on the staff for two years then, and was more or less established. Constance came at the same time as I did. They needed someone for what she calls experimental science. It isn’t important enough to be called chemistry. We have to use that lodge at the school gates as a lab. She and I made Simon’s acquaintance at more or less the same time, so, although I was the one who actually suggested that Simon should join our staff, I believe she made him more or less her protege at first, and she was rather possessive about him. He didn’t like it very much.”

“Vere is a science graduate, then? That means she has access to—”

“You said you wouldn’t interrupt!”

“Just getting an idea of the general lie of the land. Talking of which, when are you coming to my home again? I enjoyed that day very much . . . Oh, I’m sorry. You’d got to ‘he didn’t like it very much.’ Why didn’t he? Was Vere showing off her beautifully-washed and well-behaved little boy, or was she a tigress defending her young?”

“I don’t know. Anyway, it all began at the Christmas party just before Simon joined the staff.”

The Christmas party in question had not been held at Purfleet Hall, for the school had not then moved from its original home in Sussex. The party was held in three stages and on successive days, the first devoted to the youngest children. These were allowed to wear fancy dress and were looked after by the prefects while the junior staff were given a free afternoon. The second party was dedicated to the

Middle School, who were allowed to play records and to dance with one another to pop music The third was attended by the whole staff, and the Fifth and Sixth disported themselves with their opposite numbers from a small public school for boys whose senior masters came along to see fair play. This was an evening affair. It lasted from seven o'clock until eleven, and was the bitter envy of the middle and lower school.

Simon, one of the masters from the boys' school, turned out to be a good dancer. Miss Pomfret-Brown, to the relief of the shyer males, did not tread the measure, but remained, an enthroned and benign Buddha, upon the dais which formed the school stage. Refreshments were in the form of a running buffet which was set out on trestle tables in the staff common room. This had been intended for a principal bedroom when the house was built, and a small dressing-room, used by the staff as a convenient dumping-ground for their gowns when morning school was over, opened off it and was kept locked on party nights for fear that any of the hot-blooded young should be misguided enough to conceive of it as a sitting-out place.

Simon took the floor politely with each member of the staff in turn. Vere Pallis danced with him three times, and it was not until nearly ten o'clock that he came up to Alison and asked her to dance.

"I don't," she said. He had noticed that she was sitting out all the time.

"Well, I'm rather thankful, really," he said.

"Have you had anything to eat? Let's go and forage," she suggested.

They found the buffet deserted and most of the food gone, so he salvaged what he could, found a couple of clean glasses and a jug half-full of what was reputed to be claret cup, and they seated themselves in armchairs.

"How do you like your school?" she asked. "You haven't been there long, have you? You weren't at the party last

year.”

“I hate my school and I loathe teaching, but, you see—do you think we could go somewhere and talk? You say you don’t dance, so I wouldn’t be depriving you of that.”

“Well, I mustn’t be away from the party too long. With all your young gentlemen around, a little chaperoning is expected of us. Miss Pomfret-Brown doesn’t think about such things, but Miss Salter, very properly, does.”

“I *must* talk to somebody!”

“Ten minutes, then, perhaps.”

“Let’s go into that little room through there.”

“Well, that’s what we call the gowns room. It’s awfully small. There’s nobody in here. Won’t this do?”

“People will drift in and out. The buffet, you know.”

“It will look rather odd if we reappear from next door. It’s always kept locked on party nights for the obvious reason.”

“Yes.” He seemed to retire into himself, a thin, melancholy, ineffective man with the ravaged good looks of the fictional musician or painter. “I just thought perhaps . . .”

“All right,” she said, on impulse. She had had sufficient dealing with adolescent problems and homesick children to realise his need to communicate. She went across to the gowns room, took a key from her handbag, unlocked the door, and they went in. She put on the light, closed the door, locked it on the inside, and sat down on the only chair. “Now,” she said briskly, “what’s the trouble?” So, in the same tone, had she put the same question to twelve-year-olds, and that seemed to her to be his emotional age. He hoisted himself to a seat on the table.

“I’m a failure,” he said. “I wanted to be a composer. I wanted to be a great conductor. I wanted to be a concert pianist. I had dreams—all my life I’ve had dreams. *Folie de grandeur*, I suppose.”

“Haven’t we all suffered from that? ‘The fault, dear Brutus’ . . .”

“Yes, but the fault *does* lie in my stars!” said Simon, with a passion which astonished her. “I *could* have done great things! I know! I’ve got it in me.” Suddenly he had slid from the table and was pouring out the story of his wrongs. He was on his knees beside her, gripping her arms above the elbow. “Take pity on me, for God’s sake! I *must* have someone! Take pity!”

It was a situation she had not met before. Adolescent girls could be headed off before they reached this stage. The utter and complete breakdown of a man considerably older than herself found her unprepared and at a loss. He was sobbing and, beyond her sense of pity, there lay the uncomfortable and mundane thought that at any moment somebody might come into the common-room and hear him.

To muffle the sounds she shook off his grasp and pulled his head against her breast.

“So that’s how it began,” said Alison.

“‘For love of one poor moment’s kindness and ease, and sleepy mother-comfort’—yes, indeed,” said Timothy. “Lame dogs do make an appeal to our baser instincts, don’t they?”

“Our baser instincts?” As he had hoped, she smiled.

“Yes. You know, the instinct to assert our superiority by playing the Good Samaritan. Personally, I’ve always had every sympathy with the priest and the Levite. At least they had the good sense to mind their own business.”

“‘Leaving the traveller half-dead.’ Well, I couldn’t. I calmed Simon down and he told me more about it. His wife was in a private mental home, well treated, well cared for—and—incurable. It took every penny he could earn to keep her there. Meanwhile, he himself was adrift—lonely, hopeless, a failure at his job, and—so he told me—desperately in need of a woman’s sympathy and

understanding. Poor Simon!" She smiled again, reminiscently this time. "I had a terrible battle with Constance that night, when the party was over," she said. "Instead of the ten minutes I'd promised, we must have been away from the dance-floor for the best part of an hour. I don't know whether anyone else had noticed, but she certainly had. Of course, it took him a little time to pull himself together and bathe his face. Luckily there was a little washbasin in one corner of the gowns room.

"Constance swooped on us the moment we came out into the hall and Simon, prodded by me, immediately asked her to dance again. It was the last dance of the evening, of course, and the fourth one she had had with him. Exactly what she said to him during the dance I don't know, but the rest is soon told. She must have kept up a correspondence with him the following term, because he wrote to me and told me that my sister had advised him to apply for the post of music master when our school moved to Purfleet Hall the next September, and that, as I had suggested the same thing, he had made up his mind to try.

"Well, I knew that the visiting mistress who took our music did not want to leave her home and would not be going with us to Dorset, but it had never occurred to me (the reason he gave me at the time, although later I discovered that it was barely half the truth) that the poor misguided man thought girls were easier to manage than boys."

"And he soon found they weren't," said Timothy. "At least a boy is always in peril of a good man's wrath expressed by a good man's strong right arm. Girls, I assume, are subject to no such repressive measures."

"Constance monopolised him and mothered him at first, then he began to side-step her. About a month after the beginning of the autumn term he asked me to go into Bournemouth with him to choose a little gift for his wife. 'She doesn't recognise me,' he said, 'but she loves bright

things and, although I think the nurses take them away from her as soon as I've gone—in case she should try to choke herself or do some other mischief with them—at least she has the pleasure of them when I'm there, and they're awfully good at remembering to bring them out again when I go next time. She's no trouble to them, you know. I always ask, and they always tell me that. They say she's quite docile, and I don't really think she's unhappy.'

"Well, I was twenty-four at the time," Alison went on. "It's a good age for a man, I think, whether he's married or single—better, perhaps, when he's single and has no money problems—but it's rather a betwixt and between age, I always think, for a single woman. You're either becoming as hard as nails or you begin to go soft. It was that with me—beginning to go soft, I mean. Simon's life seemed to me to be one long, wretched martyrdom, and I was passionately sympathetic.

"He was not a highly-sexed man. I soon found that out. I suppose you could hardly say we were lovers, in the accepted sense, even when we cast care to the winds and went on holiday together. That happened the first Easter.

"It was a lovely spring; the sort of spring that makes you feel nostalgic and yet lightheaded. Do you know what I mean?"

"I *should* do," said Timothy, with so much meaning in his tone that she turned her eyes from him. "So you began going for these holidays," he went on in his ordinary voice. If it's an allowable enquiry, how could he afford them and still pay the fees for his wife?"

"At first he overworked. He used to stay after school to coach individual girls, and then he used to rush home for his private pupils. Then he changed his digs and went into a horrible little bed-sitter in one of the cottages where there wasn't even room for him and his piano, let alone a bed."

"What did the pupils and their mothers say to that?"

"Oh, he used to go to them, not have them come to him. He said that there was no point in teaching them to play the piano if they hadn't one at home to practise on. Then he began to economise on food, and got so thin that I realised something was wrong and put a stop to it."

"By paying for the holidays for both of you, I suppose?"

"Yes," she said. "That was it. I'd become dependent on them, you see."

"Dependent upon *him*, I think you mean."

"I suppose so. He was tender and kind and very considerate and sweet."

"I'm sure he was. Alison, why did he die? Where did the poison come from?"

"I don't know. It was some form of food-poisoning, I suppose. I can't think of any other explanation."

"It wasn't food-poisoning. The doctors found something had been added to the advocaat—a lot of it—and a quantity, although not nearly so much, to the madeira. Their analysis told them that Simon had drunk the advocaat. Do you think he felt that things between you had come to an end?"

"I don't know. I think we had virtually agreed that our secret meetings at school would have to stop, but I think, actually, he was rather relieved about that. It was the holidays he wanted, times when we could be together without wondering whether anybody was going to rattle the handle of a locked door. It all sounds rather undignified when one has to put it into words."

"Not to me. One has to take what one can get when one can get it. I've lived my whole life on that principle."

"You must have hurt some people very badly."

"I don't flatter myself to that extent, my dear."

"Will you be in court when they resume the inquest?"

"Nothing will keep me away."

"It's all such a nuisance for the school."

"What will happen about Bennison's wife?"

"I shall pay the fees, of course."

“Is there any way of letting her know what’s happened to him?”

“If she didn’t even recognise him when he went to see her, there wouldn’t be any need to tell her anything.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Inquisition

“So here,” said Miss Pomfret-Brown, “we have the criminal’s own confession.” She tapped Sandra’s essay, which lay on the table. The table was a period piece of the time of Queen Anne, elegant, simple, an early example of veneered walnut. Miss Pomfret-Brown was a *connoisseuse* and her rooms had been furnished with taste and at considerable expense.

“Yes,” said Sandra. “We didn’t mean to kill Mr. Bennison or hurt Miss Marchmont Pallis, really we didn’t.”

“Between ourselves, who *was* supposed to have been the victim?”

“I—I’d rather not say.”

“I take it that you have given up these excursions into the macabre?”

“Oh, yes. We’ve broken up our—our coven. We’ve absolved ourselves from our vows.”

“But will your familiars—you do have familiars, I trust—not take umbrage at this disaffection?”

“I—we didn’t have familiars. I don’t think we are old enough.”

“Oh, nonsense! Sarah Carrier, a child of seven, had a familiar in the form of a black cat.”

“Please may we not talk about it any more? We really, *really* are sorry.”

“I did not decide to talk about it in the first place. It was you who convened your coven.”

"I know, and I'm terribly sorry, really and truly I am. I don't know what else to say. We'll never do it again."

"Do you know your *Julius Caesar*?"

"Not very well. I don't think we do him until the Lower Fourth."

"Ah, well, let me quote to you. 'Meddle with no tradesmen's matters nor with no women's matters, but with awl.' Do you know what it means?"

"No, Miss Pomfret-Brown."

"Then let that be a warning to you. And now, although I cannot think that you deserve it, for you've been very naughty little gals, I am going to set your minds at rest. The death of poor Mr. Bennison and the serious illness of Miss Marchmont Pallis were not brought about by witchcraft, but by human agency. I cannot go into details, but you may all be questioned by the police and, if so, you must answer them simply and truthfully. You understand? I didn't want them to question silly little gals, but it's out of my hands. Agreed? Simplicity and truth. Warn the others."

"Yes, Miss Pomfret-Brown."

"And there will be no victimisation of Veronica Tooby. I am aware that her surname rhymes with 'booby,' but you will not take advantage of that fact."

"No, Miss Pomfret-Brown."

"Your essay has merit. The spelling leaves much to be desired, but you have a lively style and some pretensions to composition and arrangement. Now—your end-of-term report." She picked up an envelope and drew a document from it. Sandra, for the first time, looked distressed. A tear dripped over the freckles on her small snub nose. Miss Pomfret-Brown tore the document into pieces and threw the pieces on to the open fire. "You appear to have annoyed several members of my staff, notably Miss Bounty, but I will get them to re-word their opinion of your work and conduct—not that you deserve it," she said.

"Oh, *thank* you!"

"And now, one last word. If you persist in upsetting lessons and inciting others to do so, I shall have you in here and I shall *smack* you!"

Sandra blanched. She looked up at the rock-carved face. She tried to smile. Smacked! Like a small child! If that happened, her credit, her authority, her leadership would be gone and would be irrecoverable. As it was, her rival, the up-and-coming Gillian, was at the gates.

"I'll—I'll try my best," she muttered.

"That's a good gal," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "Here, have a chocolate. Help yourself to two or three. And now be off, and take your essay with you."

"They'll say that it was a suicide pact," said Alison. "You were right about that."

"Oh, yes? Well, I've been talking to Phisbe's lawyer. He tells me that, until the passing of the Homicide Act of 1957, the survivor of the pact you specify was held to be guilty of murder."

"They say the law is an ass."

"In this case, it has redeemed itself. After 1957 the survivor was found guilty of manslaughter, not murder, *provided that he had fully intended to kill himself* but had not managed to pull it off."

"What is the punishment for manslaughter?"

"It all depends. It *can* be a life sentence. The Act was amended, however, in 1961, and nowadays the most the survivor can be found guilty of is something called (and, in this sense, it's a legal term) complicity."

"Legal term or not, it seems to mean the same as it would in everyday English."

"Complicity in law involves aiding, abetting, counselling, or procuring the suicide, or the attempted suicide, of another person. Penalty on conviction, fourteen years."

"I didn't know that. I thought . . ."

"You thought the survivor would get off scot free?"

"Well, if suicide is no longer a criminal offence—it isn't, is it?—I don't see how they can think it right to punish the survivor."

"Well, they have to make a pretty close investigation, just because he *is* the survivor, don't you see. There's really nothing to prove that he *didn't* aid, abet, and so forth, the death of the other, while all the time having no real intention of dying with him."

"I see. And I didn't die. That was silly of me, wasn't it?"

"No, you had just enough sense not to go so far as that."

"It would have been better for me, really, if you hadn't come along in time to save my life. It looks as though the resumed inquest won't be the end of it. I may still have to appear in court and the magistrates may decide to commit me. I tell you, Tim, I would much rather die than spend fourteen years in prison."

"I'm not sure I don't agree—as regards myself, of course. Now, seriously, Alison, you just listen to me. This nonsense about you and Bennison having made a suicide pact is poppycock. You know it is, and so do I."

"But if they say it isn't? After all, I expect people know that Simon and I used to go away together. It will all come out."

"Nobody thinks anything of that sort of thing nowadays. Both of you were poisoned, one of you fatally. Your solicitor's line will be that Bennison decided to die and take you with him, and, although you may not like it, that's the way you'll have to plead, if it does come before the magistrates."

"I refuse to let people believe that Simon tried to kill me. I *know* he didn't!"

"If you take that line the police may think that *you* decided to make away with *him*, and took poison yourself to make it look as though . . ."

"Oh, Tim, surely nobody could think *that!*"

"We have to face facts, my dear, and the facts in this case are that Bennison drank the advocaat, which was made lethal, and you drank the madeira, which was not. That's what we may be up against. You don't know what the police can think when they put their minds to it. I know what's in *your* mind, and you're very likely right. *Somebody* put the drug in the drinks, and you don't believe it was Bennison. Well, my poor girl, there are only three obvious suspects, and, as I refuse to believe that you did it, they boil down to two. And as neither of us believes Bennison did it, it boils down to one. That's the unpleasant fact we have to face."

"If I say it was a suicide pact, it boils down to none. Don't you see that?"

"Such fun for your friends to hear you sentenced to fourteen years for complicity."

"If it's known we were lovers, everybody will believe I meant to kill myself, too."

"Truth will out, you know, and the truth is that Vere—"

Alison cut him short by shouting wildly,

"Truth lives in a well, and I'm going to drown her! I won't have Vere—"

Timothy rose, pulled her to him, and kissed her.

"You're a chivalrous fathead," he said, when he had released her. "I may add that, for a woman who has had a lover for six years, you don't seem very clever at the rough stuff."

"I hate you," said Alison, without any great conviction in her tone. She sat down and turned her face from him.

"Splendid! What did Mrs. Malaprop say in 1775 about a little aversion before marriage? It *was* Mrs. Malaprop, wasn't it?" he asked, in his normal, half-teasing tone.

"Before . . .?"

"Marriage. This is a proposal. Didn't you know? Don't answer me yet. Just keep the idea in mind until after the resumed inquest."

After the resumed inquest it was ruled by the police that there was a case to be answered, and Alison was charged to appear before the justices as having been a party to a suicide pact. Under the new system she was represented by counsel instructed by Phisbe's solicitor. Timothy and Miss Pomfret-Brown had put their heads together and had decided that the strongest card to play was the fact that Alison had bought Little Monkshood so very recently and proposed to live in it. This, they argued, indicated beyond doubt that a suicide pact was out of the question.

"But if you don't allow my client to claim that the deceased was the victim of a suicide pact, we may find her charged with murder," counsel pointed out.

"Not unless they can trace the drug to her possession, and they'll never do that," said Timothy. "What's more, the doctor we called in, and the people at the hospital, will probably swear that, unless their help had been forthcoming as soon as it was, Alison herself might very well have died, too. If there was no suicide pact, either Bennison committed suicide and intended to take Alison with him without her knowledge and consent, or else he was murdered by person or persons unknown, and he or they intended to kill Alison also."

"But can you name such person or persons?"

"I am not prepared to do so. Luckily, at present it isn't necessary."

"Poison doesn't get into a bottle of advocaat by accident, Mr. Herring, nor into a bottle of madeira either."

"That's what I'm saying."

He himself was called as a witness, as he was the person who had discovered Simon's body. He answered the questions fully and frankly, not only because he was on oath, but because he had nothing to hide. After he had described his experiences, he was asked,

"What were you doing at Little Monkshood on the evening in question? What caused you to go there?"

"I had been invited to a house-warming party."

"But the party had not begun, had it?"

"No, I was early."

"How did that come about?"

"I had motored down from Gloucestershire with two friends who had also received an invitation. I had allowed plenty of time because of wintry weather."

"How did you expect to get into the house if the party had not begun?"

"I assumed that Miss Pallis would be there to make the preparations, and would let us in."

"But Miss Pallis was already suffering from severe poisoning, so, in the event, she did *not* let you in. How did you gain admission to the house?"

"The front door can be opened, unless it is locked, by turning an iron handle which lifts the latch. That is what I did."

"You are familiar with the house, then?"

"Very familiar with it. The Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest, of which I am honorary secretary, had just finished renovating and restoring the house for Miss Pallis, and the Society's architect and myself had been supervising the work continually from the beginning."

"Will you tell us again, in your own words," said the presiding magistrate, "what you discovered when you entered the house? I should like to be quite clear as to details."

"I found the defendant, Miss Pallis, lying unconscious on the hall floor, Your Worship. She had been sick twice before she collapsed. It seemed to me that she had been trying to get to the front door, but had failed to reach it."

"You also found the body of Simon Bennison. Where was that?"

"It was in Miss Pallis' sitting-room which opens out of the hall. I have a plan of the house, if it will assist Your

Worship."

"It took you some time to find the body, did it not?"

"Yes, it did. My first concern was for Miss Pallis. I had no idea that anyone had been with her in the house. I discovered the body by accident, so to speak."

"How well did you know the defendant before Mr. Bennison's death?" asked the counsel who was acting for the police.

"I had met her perhaps half-a-dozen times to consult with her about the renovations."

"Thank you, Mr. Herring. I call Miss Constance Pallis."

Timothy had known that Vere was to be a witness, but he had assumed, with unusual innocence and lack of perception, that she would be called for the defence.

"Your name is Constance Vere Pallis, and you are half-sister to the defendant?"

"That is so." Vere was superbly composed.

"The last witness has told us that he met the defendant some half-a-dozen times before Mr. Bennison's death. Can you substantiate that?"

"I do not know how many times he met her, but I do know that two of those times were at his own home in Gloucestershire."

"How do you know that?"

"My half-sister herself told me so."

"Thank you, Miss Pallis. Call Miss Pomfret-Brown."

Miss Pomfret-Brown took the oath and added, at the end, the discarded and, as the oath is now worded, the redundant phrase, "so help me God." She preferred this addendum in the tone of one who dares God to let her down. Then she said, turning a threatening eye upon the chairman of the Bench,

"Now, then, Henry Wight-Seeley, what's all this nonsense?"

"Miss Marchmont Pallis, as you must have heard," said the magistrate austerely, "stands charged by the police with

complicity in the death of the late Simon Bennison by agreeing with him that they should commit suicide together.”

“Then the police must be mad.”

“You must not submit opinions. You are here to answer questions. Now, Mr. Summerhayes.”

“You would agree, Miss Pomfret-Brown, that the headmistress of a school must know a good deal about the members of her staff?” said counsel for the police.

“All carefully vetted, of course, before I take them on. Mistaken diagnosis sometimes—poor old Simon Bennison a case in point, no doubt—but usually I’m not far out.”

“What would you say was the relationship between the defendant and the deceased?”

“Mother and child.”

“I must remind you that you are on oath!”

“No need to remind me. Simon Bennison, poor little man, *was* a child—a lap-dog, if you prefer it.”

“A lap-dog? Will you please explain what you mean?”

“Obvious, I should have thought. He was a helpless, feckless, boneless individual, the sort on whom misguided gals take pity. Alison took pity on him, that’s all, but then, as I’ve often told her, she *is* a misguided gal.”

“Miss Pomfret-Brown, you are a maiden lady and—er—in any case, a lady, and you may find my next question distasteful. I must ask you to answer it to the best of your knowledge and ability.”

“Maiden lady? I didn’t know there were such things nowadays, young man. Nevertheless, fire away.”

“To the best of your knowledge, were the deceased and the defendant in love with one another?”

“Are you in love with your poodles? And are they in love with you?”

As counsel was known to breed poodles and to show them, this thrust produced laughter in court and a reprimand from the Bench.

"Please! Please! If you have no further questions, Mr. Summerhayes, I think the witness had better stand down."

"Please yourself, Henry," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "I am available if you need me again. But if you or the police think that that high-minded, incorruptible gal in the dock would enter into a suicide pact with *anybody*, let alone a niminy-piminy little man like Simon Bennison, you had better see a psychiatrist, and the sooner the better." She retired with the honours of war. The chairman's acid reminder that she was not now in her school was lost in a gale of laughter.

"Well," he went on, "the medical evidence which we were given at the beginning of this hearing is unchallenged and does not appear to be in doubt. The question before the court is whether the defendant is guilty of the crime of complicity." He explained the legal meaning of the term and then went on, "There is no doubt about the nature of the poison which was put into the drinks, and there is no doubt that both the deceased and the defendant partook of those drinks. I should like to hear the defendant, if there is anything she wishes to say."

"May I confer with my client, Your Worship?" Without waiting for permission her lawyer stepped across to Alison. A few minutes later Alison was in the witness-box taking the oath.

"Now, Miss Pallis," said her counsel, "you have pleaded Not Guilty to the charge of complicity in the death of Simon Bennison. Will you tell the court, in your own words, what happened on the day of his death?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. Where do you want me to begin?"

"Well, we seem to have heard that you gave *two* so-called house-warming parties. Why two?"

"The second one, of course, was not held, and the first one wasn't a real house-warming. I had received a letter from the Society to tell me that the restoration of Little

Monkshood was completed, so I thought it only polite to go straight away and look at it."

"And you invited Mr. Bennison to go with you?"

"Yes. I thought I would drink a toast to the house, and it didn't seem much fun to do that alone, especially as I had asked Mr. Bennison, because he is not resident at the school, to get a bottle of advocaat and some madeira wine. I met Mr. Herring as I was on my way to the house, and he offered me a lift. He had previously picked up Mr. Bennison."

"So there were three of you at this party?" said the chairman.

"Not exactly. Mr. Herring would not come in. He sat in his car."

"He didn't want to play gooseberry, I suppose."

"I submit, Your Worship," said Alison's lawyer, "that that is an unwarrantable conclusion. I think the truth is that Mr. Herring, knowing he had met my client fortuitously and had not been invited to join in the toast to the house . . ."

"I was only joking, Mr. Carr. Not in the best of taste, perhaps."

"My client is facing a serious charge, Your Worship."

"Just so. Perhaps you would care to carry on."

"Your Worship has kindly laid down a firm line of defence which I had intended, in any case, to follow. It is that there is no case for Miss Pallis to answer. The fact that she had bought this house, that she proposed to occupy it and that she had given the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest a voluntary subscription towards the cost of the restoration proves conclusively, to my mind, that at no time could she have contemplated making a suicide pact with the deceased, or with anybody else, for that matter."

"You are leading your client on to dangerous ground, are you not?" asked Summerhayes, for the police.

"That," said Alison's counsel, "is beside the point. I understand you, of course."

“Yes, so do I,” said the presiding magistrate, “and I must remind you, Mr. Summerhayes, that the question before the court is whether the defendant is, or is not, guilty of complicity. Nothing more.”

“I am obliged to Your Worship.” Mr. Summerhayes was young and inexperienced, but not so much of either as to be unaware that the chairman of the Bench was mortally afraid of Miss Pomfret-Brown.

“Furthermore,” went on Carr, “I can bring evidence to show that neither the deceased nor the defendant need necessarily have added the drug to the bottles of madeira and advocaat. I have evidence to show that any person could have entered Little Monkshood and added a lethal substance to those bottles. I call Joseph Linfield.”

Timothy had been surprised to see in court the foreman employed by the contractors. The man was sworn.

“Joseph Linfield, you were employed by your firm to oversee and direct the work which has been carried out in the house known as Little Monkshood in the village of Monkshood Mill?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“How long was the work in progress?”

“A matter of three months, sir, or thereabouts, perhaps more.”

“Now when your men had finished work each day, what did they do?”

“Packed up and went home, sir.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I meant who was responsible for locking the door?”

“We never locked up.”

“Really? Why was that?”

“So as the men could get straight on next morning, whether I was there or not.”

“But shouldn’t you have been there?” the chairman enquired.

"Only occasional, sir. Little Monks'ood wasn't our only job, you see. Sometimes I'd be over to Peterminster, or it might be I was on our new estate—two—and three-bedroom bungalows at—Kings Purcell. It would all depend where I was wanted most."

"I understand. Thank you, Mr. Carr."

"Your Worship is most welcome. There is very little need, thanks to Your Worship's intervention, for me to make my next point. I stress that if the house was left unlocked for the reason we have just been given, person or persons unknown, and not the deceased *or* Miss Pallis, could have added the drug to those bottles of liquor."

"I should like to put another question to Mr. Herring," said the chairman. "Mr. Herring, remembering that you are still on oath, will you tell the court how you came to give a lift to Mr. Bennison and Miss Pallis on the evening of October 31st?"

"Certainly, Your Worship. I was returning from Little Monkshood when I met first one and then the other of them, as I have already explained."

"You were returning from Little Monkshood?" asked Mr. Summerhayes. "How was that?"

"During the three months that the house was being restored I spent a good deal of my time at the *George* hotel in Peterminster, and after I had notified Miss Pallis that the bulk of the work on Little Monkshood was completed, I thought I would take a last look over the restoration before I returned to my home in Gloucestershire."

"Oh, yes, that reminds me," said the chairman. "One of the witnesses stated that Miss Pallis visited you twice at your home. That seems somewhat extraordinary if, as you state, you had met her only about half-a-dozen times altogether."

"It is susceptible of a ready explanation, Your Worship." Timothy was at his most bland and amiable. He was furiously angry with Vere Pallis for her backbiting tongue.

"The first occasion was also my first meeting with Miss Marchmont Pallis. She came to see me, accompanied by a friend, to find out whether my Society would be interested in restoring Little Monkshood, which she was preparing to purchase. The second time Miss Pallis visited me was at my invitation. I had converted my own house from a posting-inn to a private residence, and I thought she might be interested, before we did very much to Little Monkshood, to see what could be done with an old house."

"The two visits she paid you were both, so to speak, on business, then?"

"Exactly. My other encounters with Miss Pallis might also be said to be on business also, since they were all concerned with the restoration of her house, and took place on those premises." For the first time he was thankful that Alison had never accepted his invitations to dine with him at the *George*. "I may add that on some of the occasions when I met Miss Pallis, Mr. Bennison was present, and on at least one other occasion Mr. Parsons and his wife were with me." If the spiteful Vere Pallis intended to indicate, as she seemed to do, that Alison had been anxious to be rid of Simon because she had formed another attachment, it was desirable to put a spoke in her wheel, he thought.

"Reverting to a previous point, I take it, Mr. Herring, that, once the restoration was completed, Miss Pallis was provided with the keys of the house?" asked Summerhayes smoothly.

"Yes," said Timothy, alarmed by this question.

"So that, once she had the keys, she presumably locked the door so that no unauthorised person could enter the house?"

"Oh, yes, they could!" exclaimed Miss Pomfret-Brown, who had seated herself majestically at the pressmen's table instead of returning to the witness-bench. "Some of my naughty little gals broke into Little Monkshood, and, if *they* did, there's nothing to prove that they were the only ones,

so let's have done with all this cock-and-bull stuff about a suicide pact. What you're looking for, Mr. Superintendent of Police, is some lunatic who turned into a murderer, so the sooner you set about it, and stop pestering this poor gal, the better. Suicide pact! I never heard such a lot of nonsense in my life! Who on earth would want to make a suicide pact with a rabbit like Simon Bennison? Why, he couldn't even keep a class of little bread-and-butter misses in order, let alone make a strong-minded gal such as Marchmont go to hell with him!"

With the guile which all headmistresses acquire, she did not explain that, on one all-important occasion, Timothy himself had been instrumental in admitting her "naughty little gals" to Little Monkshood.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Ugly Sister

The anonymous letters began two days later. The presiding magistrate himself received the first one.

"Who bribed you and your fellow-magistrates? You won't get away with letting a murderess dodge her trial."

The next letter went to Miss Pomfret-Brown.

"You won't get away with it. You may be Wight-Seeley's godmother, but justice is not defeated so easily. Aren't you afraid to let a murderess loose in your school?"

Timothy also received one. It had been sent to the Society's headquarters in London and Coningsby, the official dogsbody, had re-directed it. As it was marked *Personal*, he had not opened it. It read:

"So you and your fancy woman got to Little Monkshood in time to poison Simon Bennison's drink, did you? What you want with Alison Marchmont Pallis, goodness only knows. What a precious pair of-----murderers you are!"

Timothy's first impulse was to hurl the offensive missive on to the fire. His second was to ring up the Society's solicitor, the man who had instructed the defence before the Bench.

"I've just received a poison-pen letter. I'm pretty sure I know who sent it. What's the best thing to do?"

"I've had one, too, sent care of Phisbe, as I suppose yours was. Miss Constance Vere Pallis, I assume. Leave me to deal with her. I'll have to watch my step, of course. Can't

go strewing wild accusations about, just in case it isn't that lady, but, judging from her demeanour in court, I don't think there's very much doubt."

"I'd like to go and see her, and scare the life out of her."

"Much better not. Send me your letter, and, if you hear of anybody else receiving one, suggest they also get in touch with me. We'll soon scotch the viper."

The next letter Timothy received came from Alison.

"There has been so much publicity following Simon's death that I want to resign my post at the school. Miss P.-B. won't hear of it. Do please come and persuade her. It's so bad for the school to be mixed up with suicide and murder. That's an awful word, isn't it?—but the more I turn things over in my mind, the more sure I am that Simon was killed. I think the lethal dose may have been meant for me, but that Simon drank out of the wrong bottle. It's all so horrible. Do come and talk to P.-B. Oh, and I've had an anonymous letter. What had I better do about it?"

Before Timothy could answer this, Miss Salter had a short but intriguing conversation with Sandra Davidson.

"Please, Miss Salter, may I have permission to go and speak to Miss Pomfret-Brown?"

"What about, Sandra?"

"Please, Miss Salter, it's a private matter. I want to ask her advice."

"Well, ask mine. Is it to do with school?"

"No, not really."

"Your home, then?"

"Well, only sort of. *Please*, Miss Salter! I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it was important."

"Now, look here, Sandra, Miss Pomfret-Brown is much too busy to bother with little girls. Tell me what it's all about, and then I can decide whether it's of sufficient importance to trouble Miss Pomfret-Brown with it."

"Please, Miss Salter, *do* let me go to Miss Pomfret-Brown! It's about Mr. Bennison and Miss Marchmont Pallis."

Hildegarde Salter looked at the snub-nosed, freckled little face, at the hot, eager eyes, the determined mouth, and small obstinate chin.

"Very well," she said grimly, "thou hast appealed unto Caesar, and to Caesar shalt thou go, and I hope, for your sake, that it's not some silly rigmarole. Wait outside my door." Sandra obeyed, and Hildegarde rang up Miss Pomfret-Brown's quarters on the school intercom. "Will you see Sandra Davidson?"

"Is she in trouble again?"

"Not school trouble exactly. I don't know the details. They are to be confided to you if you'll see her. She seems very much in earnest."

"Bother the wretched child! Very well. Push her along."

"Now?"

"May as well. I hope she's good for a laugh."

"I doubt it. It seems to be something about that wretched suicide."

"Oh, Lord, my dear! I'd certainly better hear what she has to say, because, you know, it wasn't suicide, it was murder, and the wrong person got killed."

Hildegarde put down the receiver and opened the door.

"What is your next lesson?" she asked the little girl.

"I've got a private study period, Miss Salter."

"All right. Miss Pomfret-Brown will see you right away."

"Oh, *thank* you, Miss Salter!"

"Well," said the head of the school, when Sandra stood before the presence. "What's all this, eh?"

"Please, Miss Pomfret-Brown, I'm sorry to bother you, but I've had a funny letter."

"Meaning funny-peculiar, I suppose."

"Yes, Miss Pomfret-Brown."

"Hand it over." The missive was brief and trenchant. Miss Pomfret-Brown read it twice, once merely skimming it and then giving it a careful scrutiny. "Hm!" she said. "Not

one of your friends having a rather unpleasant sort of joke, I suppose?"

"I don't think anybody in the school would think that letter was funny."

"An unsolicited testimonial! Now you just read this nasty piece of composition aloud to me. I want to know what it sounds like from, as the hymn puts it, the lips of children. Not that I expect loud hosannas to follow. Heaven forbid!" Sandra cleared her throat.

"Innocent children must be protected," she read aloud. "Tell your parents that a murderess is at large in your school. Advise them to take you away at once. Nobody is safe at Purfleet Hall. Tell your friends. *A Well-Wisher.*"

"Hm!" said the headmistress. "Ever thought of going on the stage? Leave the letter with me. Have you written to your parents about it?"

"Oh, *no*, Miss Pomfret-Brown!"

"Told other gals?"

"No. I thought you'd better see it first. It's Miss Vere Pallis, isn't it?"

"Now what on earth makes you say that?" demanded Miss Pomfret-Brown. "You're a very naughty little gal!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Pomfret-Brown."

"So I should think! Here's half-a-crown for you. Not a word to a soul!"

"About the funny letter, Miss Pomfret-Brown?"

"Didn't think I meant the half-crown, did you?"

Timothy, having announced his impending arrival by greetings telegram—a gesture which he felt that Miss Pomfret-Brown would appreciate—turned up at four o'clock on the following afternoon.

"Well, budding Romeo!" said the headmistress.

"Yes, indeed," said Timothy, kissing her hand. "I do so much hope you won't let Alison leave the school at present."

"Why?—not that I'm going to."

"She tells me she's had one of these letters. I think she's safer here than beetling off on her own."

"Opinions, for once, don't differ. Think Constance is dangerous?"

"Well, if it *is* Miss Vere, she seems to be sending anonymous letters all over the place, and that's never a very good sign of mental health."

"I couldn't agree with you more. Has she sent you one? Yes? And to me. And to my godson. And now, if you please, she's begun to send them to the gals."

"Not—you don't mean the children?"

"Don't I? Read this. Remember that thing by What-Name—American woman—saw it on television—some rumour about lesbians—wouldn't mean a thing nowadays, I suppose, but it emptied a school inside a matter of days. Well, murder is worse. We must put a stopper on Vere Pallis. Don't want *my* school emptied. What *was* that thing?"

"The book was called *The Children's Hour*."

"Macabre. Well, now, what's the plan of campaign?"

"In some circumstances I would suggest the police, but in this case . . ."

"Yes, bad publicity for my school and not much fun for Alison. Poor Vere is potty, of course, but that don't help matters. On the contrary. Well, what do you think?"

"A personal encounter and the use of lurid threats—not, of course, before witnesses."

"You prepared to have a go?"

"Our solicitor has opted to take first knock. He wants to collect the poison-pen letters and take them with him."

"He's welcome to mine, and he can have this one which was sent to the child."

"Why are we so certain it's Vere Pallis? Couldn't there be anybody else?"

"Who?"

"Well, some relative or close friend of Bennison. We aren't justified in condemning Vere Pallis out of hand."

"That's true. I suppose the police are still hunting for clues? I still say it was murder, not suicide."

"Oh, I think they are taking it for granted that they were right the first time, and that it *was* a suicide pact. After all, Alison has been cleared of complicity, but that doesn't prove, from their point of view, that she and Bennison hadn't planned to die together. I don't see why murder should occur to them."

"Wish you'd arrange to go and talk to Vere yourself. Be better than that dry lawyer fellow."

"All right. I'll go and see him. I think, with you, that one of us should have a try before we stick a solicitor on to the job. Trouble is that he's had one of the letters himself, and is probably a bit ruffled in consequence."

"This is no time for a solicitor to get touchy. Go and see him at once."

Timothy had found no difficulty, at that wintry time of the year, in reserving a room at the *George*. He went back to the hotel as soon as he had left the school, and telephoned the solicitor as soon as he arrived.

"Something else has come up about those letters. Can you meet me at Phisbe's place some time tomorrow afternoon? Three o'clock? Right. I've collected two more of the beastly things. I'll bring them with me."

Before he kept the tryst at Phisbe's London headquarters he paid another visit to the school and waited for Miss Pomfret-Brown until she came out from the morning assembly.

"I'm seeing my chap today," he said, "but, before I do, there's something I wanted to ask you. Do you think this letter that you showed me yesterday is the only one of these anonymous things to come to the school, apart from your own and Alison's?"

"No. My deputy, Hildegard Salter, has had one. She brought it to me before assembly. I have warned anyone else who gets one to bring it straight along."

"I wonder whether I might take a look at the envelope?"

"The post-mark won't help. It's Southampton."

There was a tap at the door. Timothy's cousin came in.

"You asked us in assembly," she began.

"Right. Hand it over."

April did so, and entered into explanations.

"The letter addressed to me is from Vere Pallis. She encloses an anonymous letter which she says she found when she got back to her flat in Newcastle."

"I'll deal with it. Thank you, Miss Bounty. You may embrace Mr. Herring, if that is your cousinly custom, but then you must make yourself scarce. I take it you have a class?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Pomfret-Brown."

"Go to it. Give them of your best. Close the door quietly. Now, Timothy, anything else?"

"Only one point, and it may have no significance. Would there be any particular reason for singling out this one child to receive a letter?"

"Oh, most probably. That's another reason for thinking that Vere Pallis is the author. This particular child, Sandra Davidson, used to be one of the most gifted trouble-makers in the lower school. She would have made the perfect vehicle, in Constance Pallis's time, for spreading alarm among the others and, from them, to their parents."

"I gather that this has not happened."

"No. Sandra and I have an alliance founded upon a certain amount of mutual respect and liking, and, on her part, upon a certain well-defined fear. I have discovered that Sandra is afraid of being smacked."

"Is that an euphemism for . . .?"

"Oh, no. It means exactly what it sounds like. Physically, nothing. As a blow to self-esteem, *amour propre* and acceptance as a leader of the sinful, something quite impossible of contemplation. Sometimes I wish I could feel that it would have the same effect upon Alison! Fancy falling

in and then out of love with a shrimp like poor Simon Bennison, and causing me all this trouble!"

"You think she *had* fallen out of love with him, then?"

"What do *you* think?"

"What I think isn't evidence."

"Well, Sir Modesty, be off and see this lawyer fellow. We're wasting time. By the way, if you take her on, I must warn you you'll find Alison cussed to the point of obstinacy, quick-tempered, nervous, proud, unreasonable . . ."

"Sensitive, unapproachable, and, of course, strangely beautiful. I know. I've got a blood mare exactly like that."

"What do you do?—belt her?"

"You're too good a horsewoman to believe that."

"Well," said the solicitor, at the end of three-quarters of an hour, "you may be right. After all, as you point out, we have no real proof. You say you are going to confront her with the letters you've collected and tell her you think she sent them. I don't know how you'll get on. Don't be surprised if she immediately calls up her lawyer and they talk about unwarrantable suspicions and defamation of character. If you *do* run into trouble, let me know at once. Good luck—and for goodness' sake don't stick your neck out further than you can help."

Timothy, having turned over in his mind several angles of approach, finally settled upon one and, on arrival in Newcastle after an overnight stop at Nottingham, the first thing he did was to look for Vere Pallis's name in the local telephone directory, half-expecting that it might not yet have been inserted. If it were not there, he decided that he must contact her through her school, but this he was not at all anxious to do, since he had no intention of bringing her name into prominence if this could be avoided. He had obtained the name of the school, however, from Miss Pomfret-Brown. Timothy had decided not to ask Alison for it,

thinking that it would be better if she did not know (at any rate until after it was over) of his visit to her sister.

Vere Pallis, however, was in the book, so, hoping that he would find her at home, he rang the number immediately he had finished his dinner.

"Miss Vere Pallis?"

"Speaking."

"This is Timothy Herring."

"I don't think I—Oh, yes, I know."

"May I come round and see you?"

"May I ask why?"

"Some business I can't discuss over the telephone. It's very important, or I wouldn't bother you."

"Where are you speaking from?"

"My hotel. I am in Newcastle."

"I can't think why you want to see me."

"Shall we say in about half-an-hour's time, then?"

"Is it about my sister?"

"Yes, in a way."

"Oh, dear! Surely Alison can manage her own affairs!"

"It doesn't seem much like it. All right, then. In about half-an-hour. Thanks very much. Goodbye!"

Not knowing the city, he left his car in the hotel garage and called a taxi. Vere's flat was in a new block a long way from the city centre and was on the fourth floor. She opened the door to him herself and invited him in.

"I suppose it's about this wretched house she's bought," she observed. "If she wants financial help she won't get it from me. If she hadn't had this ridiculous idea of living there with Simon Bennison, there would never have been all this trouble. But do sit down. Is this going to take very long? I've a stack of exercise books to mark."

"No, it won't take long, I hope," said Timothy. "I'll come to the point at once. I believe you received one of these." He laid the anonymous letters on the settee beside her.

"What are they?" she asked. He had seen a tell-tale flicker in her eyes, and felt that he was on the right track.

"I'd rather you saw for yourself," he said smoothly. She turned them over.

"Oh, I see," she said. "I've had one. Not very edifying, are they? What is Alison doing about them?"

"There is nothing much she *can* do, until we know who sent them. I suppose you can't think of anybody who would be nasty-minded and cowardly enough to send things like this to your half-sister's friends, can you?"

"Is that what you came all this way to ask me? I should have thought a four-penny stamp would have met the case."

"A letter, if any, would have come from a solicitor, of course, and, failing a visit from me, it's more than probable that you would have received a call from the police."

"The police? What utter nonsense!" Her eyes flickered again. "What on earth have I to do with the police?"

"Well, the references in the letters to a murderess are libellous and therefore actionable."

"Well, my dear good man, I didn't utter the libel!"

"As next of kin to the libelled person, the police might well be interested in your reaction to the letters, don't you think?" asked Timothy, smoothly.

I fail to see why they should contact me. Alison is not mentioned by name in any of the letters, is she? Any one of hundreds of people might be the—the person concerned."

"Not by inference, though. I mean, all the pointers are there, and they indicate, quite clearly, your half-sister."

"All the same, no names, no pack-drill, I should have thought," retorted Vere, rallying herself and contriving to smile. "I don't believe, for a single instant, that the police would come here."

"One can't be sure, though, and those who live in blocks of flats don't want the neighbours surmising all sorts of

things. You'd be surprised at how much surmising goes on when people are visited by the police."

"Your acquaintance with the police is doubtless far more extensive than my own. In any case, what is your personal interest in the case? You seem to be making yourself very active in the matter, and, I add, most impertinently so."

"People are apt to equate impertinence with impudence, aren't they? I hope you are not falling into that same error, although I know some dictionaries do. In its original form impertinent means not germane to the issue, beside the point, not on the agenda—that kind of thing—whereas impudent . . ."

"Thank you! I meant what I said. Your interference is impertinent."

"But it isn't, you know. I have a very real determination and, I believe, a right, to track down the author of these letters. You see, I've had one of the beastly things myself."

"Well, that's not very surprising, since it was through you that Alison had this renovation of Little Monkshood done."

"Through the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest, you mean."

"Are you denying that you had a personal interest in the matter?"

"In so far as I considered Little Monkshood to be a building of historic importance and recommended it as such to my committee, I had a personal interest as the servant of that committee, therefore what you say is true enough, but we're wandering from the point. My question was . . ."

"I remember perfectly well what your question was. My answer, since you pursue the point, is that I know of nobody who would utter anonymous letters."

"They are all typewritten, of course, as were the envelopes."

"Well, I suppose an anonymous letter-writer would hardly utter the things in manuscript form."

"I submitted the letters, before I left town, to an expert. He informed me that, of those I showed him, not one was scripted on the same typewriter as was its envelope. In fact, that each letter, too, had been tapped out on a different machine. Curious, don't you think?"

"I have no idea. I know little about typewriters."

"Well, *my* idea, for what it's worth, is that the letters come from somebody who is in a position to have access to at least ten typewriters."

"It sounds like some thwarted spinster in an office."

"I wondered whether it could be some thwarted spinster in a school which runs a commercial course. A comprehensive school for girls, perhaps. It would be easy enough, in such a place, I imagine, for a teacher staying there after school hours to obtain access to twenty different typewriters, if she liked. I believe, in a good commercial class, students are trained to use a variety of machines. Isn't that so?"

"I have no idea," said Vere coldly; but she licked lips which had gone very dry.

"Perhaps, as it is your half-sister who has been involved in all this unpleasantness, you could find out whether that is the position in your own school," Timothy went on pleasantly. "It might give us a pointer, what? Oh, well, I'll push off. You've work to do. I hoped you'd be able to suggest who the bats-in-the-belfry lady might be, but I suppose it was rather a long shot, actually."

"There are two things I can tell you, but they may not be of much help," said Vere. "My own letter, I remember, bore a Southampton postmark and Simon Bennison's wife is in a private mental home not seven miles from there, and it is on a bus route. No doubt Alison can give you the exact address." She rose, and Timothy did the same. "Well, goodbye, Mr. Herring. I am sorry you had such a fruitless journey."

"Oh, I wouldn't call it fruitless," said Timothy cheerfully. "I'm very glad to have seen you. If anything crops up, you *will* let me know, won't you? You see, if we can frighten this misguided lady, it might save her from having to answer awkward questions from the police a bit later on. One's sorry for these unfortunate women. One doesn't want to cause them a lot of trouble over what is, after all, a mere mental aberration. I mean, one doesn't think of comparing it with, for example, blackmail, does one?"

"Blackmail is an interesting word coming from *you*," said Vere Pallis, with extraordinary and venomous bitterness. Timothy smiled at her.

"There's such a thing as *benevolent* blackmail," he said, "but perhaps you've never heard of it."

"Benevolence is not much in my line. A working woman has very little scope for it, or inclination, either. *Good night*, Mr. Herring. Don't fall down the lift-shaft."

"I bet you wish I would!" thought Timothy, grinning to himself.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Purification Ceremony

"The brats," said Miss Pomfret-Brown, when Timothy called on her upon his return from Newcastle, "are giving Alison the devil of a time."

"You mean because she was hauled up in court?"

"Ah, not in the way you mean, so take that scowl from your brow. No, the little nit-wits are lionising her. The misunderstood heroine. The woman who braved all for love. The soul snatched from the brink of the grave. The trouble is that we couldn't keep the case out of the papers. Thank God we break up tomorrow. Well, how did you get on with Vere Pallis?"

Timothy described his visit.

"I don't think I did much good," he said. "I know I scared her once or twice, but she seems pretty tough and, of course, we haven't a shred of what police or lawyers would call proof."

"We have now," said Miss Pomfret-Brown. "That is, if your letter is anything like mine."

"My letter?"

"Enclosed with the one I received from her yesterday morning. She must have written both directly you left her. Took your time getting back here, didn't you?"

I stayed a night at Nottingham and then pushed over to Shrewsbury to see Tom Parsons."

"Oh, the architect. Had he had one of the letters?"

"No. I didn't really think he would have had one, but I thought I'd make sure. I had another reason for wanting to chat with him, though. As soon as Alison has got over Bennison's dying like that in Little Monkshood, we shall have to find out what she wants done with the place, and I thought it might be as well to talk it over with Parsons so that we had some suggestions to make."

"What conclusion did you reach?"

"Well, only the obvious one."

"For your Society to buy back from Alison, I suppose."

"That's it. Then, of course, we should open the place more than once a week and more than four months in the year. We couldn't think of any other idea. If she is still of the mind she was when I last spoke to her about it, I think she'll be more than willing to sell. The place can be nothing better than a white elephant to her now."

"She's furnished it, you know, and at some considerable trouble and expense."

"Yes. I want to go and have another look at it, and take a valuer with me for the furniture in case she wants to sell that. Then I shall have to put the whole thing to my committee and, after that, we can get action."

"Alison may not want to sell the house."

"Oh, surely, after what's happened . . .!"

I don't know so much. She was dead keen on the house, Simon or no Simon, and she's a very obstinate gal."

"It sounds a bit morbid to me. I hope you're wrong."

"Hildegarde Salter doesn't think much of me as a psychologist, but in this instance I don't think I am far out. Still, we shall see. Read your letter, and then we'll exchange missives, if yours is suitable for my eyes."

Timothy read his letter. This was it:

"You called my bluff and I suppose I had better give in. No more of those letters. I was out of my mind when I sent them. I believe, in spite of your impudence, (have I got it right this time?), you are a gentleman and will take no

further action. I assure you there will be no more anonymity. If your visit has really saved me from the police, I am more than grateful. Perhaps we could meet again sometime, under happier circumstances.”

“Well!” said Timothy, handing over the missive. “This does surprise me.”

“Why?”

“Because she has given in so soon, and so easily. I expected a fight, when she’d had time to see that my threats really hadn’t a leg to stand on. Why, she sounds quite a reasonable, even a rather nice woman.”

“Beware of the Greeks when they come bearing gifts. I wouldn’t trust Vere Pallis an inch. Tell me, Timothy Herring, who *did* put the lethal dose in the advocaat?”

“I know what you’re implying, but I’ve thought it over, and she *couldn’t* have done. She was in Newcastle.”

“Suppose we could prove she wasn’t? It was half-term, remember. She need not have been in Newcastle.”

“Oh, no! You go too far. This craving for sensation must cease.”

“It is all very well to laugh it off, Timothy Herring. Well, here’s my letter from her—handwritten, of course. No more typewriters.”

Timothy read the second letter. It ran:

“I don’t like it up here in the north. The weather is so cold after Dorset, and I am overworked at the school. I am given C stream classes for chemistry as well as the examination forms, and it seems to me such a waste of my time. If ever you have a vacancy I should be only too delighted to come back. I fancy you know how it was between Simon Bennison and me. I left because, with my sister buying that house, I could stand the situation no longer. I am sorry I wrote those silly letters. That’s all they were—despairing and silly. I suppose it was your idea to send Mr. Herring up here. You were always the wisest of women.”

"Too wise, anyway, to be taken in by compliments from *that* source," said Miss Pomfret-Brown drily, when Timothy commented upon the last statement in the letter. "And now, I suppose, you want to see Alison. I expect she had planned to spend the Christmas holiday with Simon, as usual. Oh, yes, I knew all about those holidays, and anything I didn't know, that snake in the grass, Constance Vere Pallis, ferreted out and told me. Alison and Simon were about as clever at covering their tracks as the Yeti is, on the bare snowy slopes of the Himalayas!"

"For see where Beatrice like a lapwing runs
Close to the ground to hear our conference,'" quoted Timothy. "That was Vere, you think?"

"Exactly. I shall now take Alison out of class and send her to you here and make myself scarce. Tell her about your visit to Constance, if you see fit."

"Do you think I should, O wisest of women?"

I can't smack Alison, but I *could* box your ears!" retorted Miss Pomfret-Brown.

"A house-party for Christmas," said Timothy. "Tom and Diana Parsons will be there, and so will my sister, my brother-in-law and their two children. I'll even ask my cousin April, if you like, and, considering what I think of her, I can't say fairer than that."

"Well, I . . ."

"Right. That's settled, then. I'll drive you to the Cotswolds tomorrow. Be ready at nine sharp, because I must get there in time to see that all is in readiness for the festivities."

"Oh, but . . ."

"Don't worry. My sister and the brats are already in possession. It will all be perfectly proper."

"I didn't mean *that*! Of course I didn't!"

“‘Methinks the lady doth protest too much.’ In pledge of tomorrow morning at nine, then, I kiss your hands.”

“That awful house has got to be purified,” said Veronica. Her companions could scarcely have been more surprised if the school cat had uttered this sentiment. It was the first day of the Spring term and Veronica had joined the group without invitation. “After what happened, we’ve simply *got* to take the spell off,” she continued.

“And who asked *you* to push in?” demanded Sandra. Gillian—the pushful Gillian—who had had much the same irate question on the tip of her tongue, changed her mind. Sandra, she had decided, must be put firmly in her place this term—and kept there. It was time her reign was ended.

“Why shouldn’t she push in?” she demanded. “she’s as much right to speak as *you* have.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” said this new and bold Veronica. “What’s *right*. We must do what’s *right*. While that spell is on the house, somebody else might die there.”

“Oh, no, they won’t,” said Sandra loftily. “I had a long chat with Miss Pomfret-Brown last term—I told you—and she said not to worry. What happened was nothing to do with us.”

“How funny!” said Gillian, sneering. “I quite thought it was Veronica who went to P.-B.”

“Yes, and I’ve been reading a book in the holidays,” said Veronica. “In our town, when you’re twelve they let you use the grown-ups’ library if your parents write a letter and say you want to study, so I got out a book and it said that there are spells for taking curses off, and it told you what they were.”

“Funny sort of book to get out of a public library,” said Mavis.

“No, it wasn’t. It was a sort of ABC of superstitions and things, and it was written by an awfully important man who

lectures in an American university and everything. It wasn't a *horrid* book at all—just interesting. I copied some of it out—the bits that will help us take off the curse, you know.”

Sandra changed her tactics.

“How could we get inside the house?” she asked.

“Broken window—same way as before,” said Caroline.

“Be your age, clot! The whole place has been done up, and even the sash windows, where you could get a knife under, have gone.”

“Well, how do burglars manage?”

“They take wax impressions of keys and go to a locksmith.”

“Yes, but we haven't got keys, you dopey idiot.”

“Well, it's got to be done,” said Veronica. “If anybody else dies there, before we've taken off the curse, we'll be murderers.”

“Oh, that's old stuff!” said Mavis. “There's the bell.”

“I've got an idea,” said Gillian, “but I'll need time to work it out. You'd all better meet me at afternoon break.”

“Says who?” demanded Sandra belligerently. “If you want to give the orders, Gillian Schofield, you can jolly well form your own gang. If you've got any ideas, you can tell them to me privately, and I'll decide whether they're any good, and I wouldn't mind betting that they'll be sheer mouse-trap cheese, so there!”

“We'd better decide whether this book Veronica read is any good, before we make plans for getting into the house,” said Connie Moosedeer.”

“Something in that,” agreed Sandra. “All right, the meeting will be at two o'clock sharp behind the gym. Veronica, bring along anything you've got. There aren't any afternoon games or riding lessons or anything on the first day of term, so we can have a jolly good long meeting and sort everything out.”

“It will be frightfully cold behind the gym. Why can't we use the changing rooms? There won't be anybody there if

there aren't any games," said Gillian. Irritated although she was by this evidence that she had not even scotched the snake, let alone killed it, Sandra was compelled to admit that Gillian's was a sensible suggestion and would be adopted, so, at two o'clock, the re-formed coven met, sat on the changing-room shoe-lockers—shoes, having had contact with gravel, grass, and mud, were not permitted to be crammed in with shorts and shirts—and invited Veronica to get weaving.

"Well," she said, with a return of the diffidence to which the others were accustomed, "I don't know which method you'll think the best, so perhaps I'd better read them all out. Of course, you may not want . . ."

"Cut the cackle, and get on with it," said Sandra curtly.

"Yes, all right, then. Well, two of them are charms against the Evil Eye."

"That's not much good for taking off a curse, but it's good for protection, I suppose. What's needed?"

"Only garlic—that's one."

"Ugh! Filthy-smelling stuff! You can cut that out, for a start."

"It's easy to get, though," said Connie Moosedeer, "and lots of the things witches use don't smell very nice."

"The other one is a thing called a *triskelion*. It's like the badge of the Isle of Man—you know, three legs going sort of round in a circle and joined together at the top."

"We'll use that. It only needs a drawing, I suppose. Now the important thing. What do you *do* to take off a spell?"

"Well, there are things you can *say*."

"What things?"

"Well, you can say *Ofano Oblamo Ospergo*."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, I copied out some more. There's *Hola Noa Massa*."

"Massa's in de cold, cold ground!" said Gillian.

"Oh, shut up!" said Sandra. "That's not clever or even funny. And now we can't use that one, because you've been

silly about it. Go on, Veronica."

"I only took down one more. It's *Pax Sax Sarax*."

"That's the best, because it's partly Latin, so it's a church sort of thing, like when they exorcise ghosts."

"Oh, I don't think it's quite like that, Sandra. I ought to have said it's only for getting rid of an illness."

"Oh, honestly, Veronica! You *are* a dope! What's the good of that?"

"I just thought it might help. You can't have too much protection when somebody's died in a house, can you? But I've got some things for averting witchcraft."

"We don't want to avert it; we want to cure it. I don't see how this beastly book of yours is any good at all."

"I haven't finished yet, Sandra."

"Oh? Well, what else have you got?"

"There's the Shield of Solomon."

"What's that?"

Veronica dropped her voice.

"It's a pentagram. You have to draw it, like-like the things you drew when you made me a witch. Then you exorcise the spell, and then you nail a horseshoe outside the door."

"That's only a good-luck sign."

"Oh, no, it isn't, Sandra. It's to keep witches out."

"But that means it would keep *us* out," said Gillian.

"You do it *after* you've taken off the curse, loony!" said Sandra, witheringly. "Once we've taken off the curse we shan't *want* to go inside the house again, not while we're witches. We're only *being* witches just this one occasion. For goodness' sake be your age, can't you? Now, listen, everybody. This afternoon may be our only chance to do what we have to do. We're going to Little Monkshood right away, and do all these things to take away the curse. I got all *my* magic out of a book, too, only mine wasn't from the library, it belongs to my older sister. I'm not sure, but I *think* she might be a Satanist."

"Haven't you asked her?" demanded Mavis, in an awestruck, sepulchral tone. "They have the Black Mass, and all that sort of thing, don't they?"

"Never mind what they have. Now we shall want some chalk—Caroline, you go and get some from the form-room—and a horse-shoe—Mr. Gubbins at the forge will give me one if I say I want it for my sister's wedding—and we'd better have a strong-bladed knife in case it's any use forcing a window. You'd better get that, Connie. Sneak one out of the kitchen. Now is that the lot?"

"I know a protective prayer—well, it isn't exactly a prayer, more a sort of invocation," said Veronica. "It will get us safely out of the house again."

"We shan't need that, once the curse is taken off," said Gillian.

"The curse is only being taken off the *house*!" retorted Sandra. "And if we take off the curse, the evil spirits will probably guess that we don't intend to be witches any more. Don't you *see*? And then we could be in real trouble. Meet me outside the field gate in a quarter of an hour. Slip out separately. There's nothing to say we mayn't go for a walk, so long as we keep in bounds."

"But, if we go to Little Monkshood, we *shan't* be keeping in bounds," Stephanie pointed out.

"Who said we would, Cleverstick? That's why I don't want you noticed, all leaving the field in a bunch."

"I'll tell you what," said Veronica, "if you don't mind, Sandra, I think we ought to have some personal protection. Each of us, I mean."

"Not if it's garlic," said the leader firmly.

"It isn't. It's the magic square."

"What's that?"

"Well, you draw a square, you see, and then you divide it into nine other little squares, and then you write the numbers from one to nine, only they add up, the same,

across, and down—it's ever so clever, really—to fifteen, if you see what I mean."

"What's fifteen got to do with it?" asked the scornful Gillian.

"What's it matter what's fifteen got to do with it?" demanded Sandra belligerently. "You carry on, Veronica. Draw out seven of these squares—unless Gillian doesn't want one—and dish them out when we meet this afternoon."

This was done, and, immediately it seemed safe to do so, the intrepid coven started on its way to Little Monkshood. Neither its members nor Timothy were aware that they were destined to encounter one another. Timothy saw the children before they were aware of his presence. He had parked his car in front of the house, and was seated in it, with Tom and Diana Parsons, when Sandra and her companions came in sight.

"Hullo," he said. "The hounds of Spring!" He did not add that, as he recognised in their leader one of Alison's bevy of pseudo-house-cleaners, he wondered whether she was following them, although the thought did cross his mind.

"They look like hounds who are not about their lawful business," said Diana, who was seated beside him. "I have a feeling that they are where they should not be."

"Oh, no," said Timothy. "I've met one or two of them before. They're Alison's task force." He tooted the horn. The children stopped. There was what appeared to be a hasty conference and a suggestion of turning tail.

"I thought so," said Diana. "I've been caught out-of-bounds myself in my time,"

Sandra apparently was successful in rallying her troops. She led them towards the car. Timothy let down the driver's window and put out his head.

"Well, well, well!" he said. "How's tricks?"

"Oh," said Sandra, coming up to him, "you let us in before. Can you let us in again? We—we haven't brought the

key.”

“Then how did you propose to force an entry?”

“I don’t sort of really know.”

“Is Miss Pallis with you?”

“Oh, well, no. No, she isn’t. Not this time.”

“Nor last time, as I remember it.” He received a nudge from Diana. “What’s the game?”

“Oh, do you mind not asking? And—and we’re in an awful hurry. There’s something we’ve got to do in there, and this is our only chance, because, after this, there will be games, you see, and our riding lessons. *Please* help us.”

“Retire twenty paces. I would be in conference.” Sandra looked anxious. The coven had sidled a little closer. Without turning her head, she motioned them away. “Look here,” he went on, “there *is* a game on, isn’t there? You tell me what it is, then you get back while I talk to Mrs. Parsons. She understands small girls’ devilment, which is more than I do. Come on, now.”

“All right. But we *must* be quick! We wanted to get in there and—and sort of pay our respects.”

“What on earth for?”

“I—I don’t really know. We—well, we just thought we would.” She looked imploringly at him.

“Respects be d—jolly well sugared!” He turned to Diana.

“The house belongs to Miss Pallis,” she said, “and I don’t think you have permission to go inside. Besides, you’re not being truthful, are you?”

“Not—no, not quite. You see—well, we think it was our fault about Mr. Bennison, and we didn’t—don’t want anybody else to . . .”

“*Your* fault? *You* didn’t put poison in those bottles, did you?” (Timothy had had no idea that Diana could be magisterial.)

“No. Only sort of in the air.”

Diana, as women will, when dealing with girls, became impatient.

“Look here,” she said, “out with it, and no more nonsense. You morbid little beasts wanted to get inside and gloat over the spot marked with an X, didn’t you?”

At this plain speaking Sandra’s small face crimsoned, but, to Timothy’s astonishment, with anger, not with embarrassment or shame.

“No, of course we didn’t! We wanted to take the spell off, that’s all. We put a curse on April F . . . on Miss Bounty, and it went wrong, and Mr. Bennison was killed and Miss Pallis got ill, and—and—we thought the curse might still be there, so we ought to do something about it.” She stepped back, as Timothy opened the door of the car.

“No conference needed,” he said. “You’re not going in, partly because I haven’t a key, and partly because I won’t let you. Besides, there’s no need. I’m a wizard myself, so I know what I’m talking about. All you need do—there are seven of you, I see, so that’s all right—is to walk widdershins round the house, reciting as you go. That’ll do the trick. Then you cut back to school. I’m corning there myself, as a matter of fact. I want to see Miss Pallis about this house. Get on with it, if you’re in a hurry.”

“It wouldn’t be the same thing at all,” said Sandra. “Besides, what’s widdershins, anyway? It’s for churches, I thought.” She looked round. Only one of her band was left, the others, suborned by Gillian, were slinking to the gate and, as she watched, they reached it and began running down the lane towards the highroad. Even Veronica had joined in the panic flight. Sandra’s only staunch supporter was Connie Moosedeer, who now came strolling up with silent Red Indian tread.

“They got cold feet,” she said. “Gillian worked on them. She said we’d all be expelled. What’s happening now?”

“Nothing,” said the leader morosely. It was Waterloo. She turned to Timothy. “Shall I tell Miss Pallis you’re coming?”

"It would be a favour I scarcely deserve," he responded gallantly. "I'm truly sorry to upset your plans, but, as a sensible woman, surely you can see it wouldn't do. It's more than possible that the police still have an eye on this place, you know. Suppose you had got in—which I suppose you would have done if I had not been here, and probably by burglarious methods at that—and the police had found you and had frogmarched you back to Miss Pomfret-Brown handcuffed to the gendarmes? I bet you never thought of that, did you?"

"No," said Sandra faintly. "No, we never did."

"All right. Perhaps you and this other young woman would like to hop into the car. We'll give you a lift back to school. *That'll* show the others, won't it?"

"Yes, it certainly will," said Sandra, brightening up. Diana got out of the car.

"I'll sit at the back with Tom," she said, "then you two can cram in beside Tim. What happens," she added, when, this manoeuvre accomplished, Timothy let in the clutch, "if we run across any member of the staff?"

"It will be all right," said Sandra confidently, "if we're with you. They won't know you're not parents."

"Good Lord!" said Tom Parsons, making his only contribution to the proceedings, and that in a tone of horror.

"Tell me about the curse," said Timothy.

"Oh, there they are!" cried Sandra, as the deserters came in sight. "Oh, do sound your horn as we go past! Sucks to Gillian, the nasty, horrible, yellow, cowardly creep! Come to think of it," she added, as the car, having given the devil's tattoo—out of place, possibly, considering the whole nature of the circumstances—sailed past the foot—slogging traitors, "it was just a bit further on from here that I first saw the ghost of Miss Vere Pallis that night."

His recent visit to Constance Vere Pallis made Timothy react promptly to this mention of her name.

"Oh, yes?" he said. "When would that have been?"

"On the night of Hallowe'en. I was out of school. I was going to the churchyard."

"Whatever for?"

"Well, to see if it was true about the ghosts. I saw Miss Vere's. It was walking along this road."

"Oh, I see." He saw, or thought he might be seeing, a very great deal. "And what happened?"

"It went into the churchyard and disappeared. I thought at first it was really her herself, and then, of course, I didn't see how it could be, because Miss Vere was in Northumberland."

"Ah, yes, of course. Have you told anybody else?"

"Only the others. They didn't believe me. They thought I made it up."

"You didn't, by any chance, address the ghost? Speak to it? Call it by name, or anything?"

"Oh, no, of course I didn't. You see, when I thought it was real, well, I forgot Miss Vere wasn't on our staff any longer, so I thought about being expelled for being out of the school grounds at night. Then, when I realised it was a ghost, well, you don't speak to ghosts unless they want to be spoken to, do you? So I just hoped I wouldn't be noticed, and I didn't go into the churchyard after all."

"Was anybody with you?"

"No. None of the others would risk it."

"I can't say I blame them."

"I wondered afterwards why I should have seen Miss Vere's ghost when she wasn't dead."

"Oh, that can happen. On Hallowe'en anything can happen. There's that business about looking into a mirror in the dark, and seeing the ghost of your future husband. Haven't you ever done that?"

"Oh, no. I shouldn't be interested. I'm not going to get married. One doesn't have to, nowadays," said Sandra.

"That's what the pill is about."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Phisbe Meets Again

"A little learning may be a dangerous thing," said Timothy to Coningsby at Phisbe's headquarters on the following day, "but a little knowledge may not only be dangerous but damned embarrassing."

The young, earnest, incredibly efficient dogsbody, without whom the Society could not have accomplished a tenth of its work, had not the faintest idea of the honorary secretary's meaning. He took off his spectacles and repeated politely, but in the form of a question:

"A little knowledge, Mr. Herring?"

"Yes. I've come by a little knowledge in a most unexpected way. It's practically dynamite and I haven't the ghost of a notion what to do with it. Ghosts, in fact, are of the essence."

"The *poltergeist* which came here has gone, by the way."

"Probably haunting Nanradoc Castle by now. How are things going there?"

"We are opening the castle even earlier than we did last season. This summer's takings exceeded the treasurer's hopes. He is thinking of asking the committee to agree to three shillings instead of two and sixpence for admission to the castle and grounds, and to increase the price of the medieval banquets. The guesthouse for members of the Society is also flourishing and, in accordance with many

requests, it is remaining open from March until the end of October, with a special three days at Christmas.”

“That’s fine. Tell me, Coningsby, what would you do if your suspicions that a certain person had committed a very serious crime seemed to be confirmed?”

“I suppose I should think it my duty to inform the police.”

“Yes, but the confirmation came in a way that I—in fact, that nobody could possibly have expected, and the trouble is that, if I go to the police with this little bit of knowledge—and I must emphasise that it *is* only a little bit—I may be landing the party (whom I suspect) in very serious trouble. It’s a case of murder, you see.”

“Oh, dear me, yes. I see what you mean. Apart from this bit of knowledge to which you refer, are your suspicions based on any kind of evidence?”

“That’s the point. They’re not—not really. It’s just a hunch I have. The affair is complicated by a very important fact, though. There was an inquest, followed by a hearing before the magistrates, and the whole thing has been buried, along with the dead man. I’m not at all sure I want to dig it up again.”

“Was it this suspect of yours who was brought before the magistrates, may I ask?”

“No, and the hearing was not to decide whether a murderer should stand trial. Murder didn’t enter into it. The accused was brought before the court for a decision as to whether or not she was guilty of complicity.”

“Not as an accessory to murder, then?”

“No. As the remaining partner in a suicide pact.”

“Oh, I see. I am afraid my knowledge of the law, such as it is, is confined to the law of libel, the law of Trusts and the laws concerning property.”

“Good Lord! I thought we kept a tame solicitor!”

“Oh, yes, of course we do, Mr. Herring, and I should not dream of encroaching. I have an interest—purely academic

—in these matters.”

“Well, you see my difficulty, don’t you? So far as is known, the thing began as a suicide pact. One partner succumbed to poisoning, the other lived, but has been cleared of complicity.”

“Which means that the justices took the view that she also intended to die, but did not actually succumb.”

“That’s it.”

“What made you think of murder, Mr. Herring?”

“I happen to be pretty sure that the person I am thinking of could have got hold of poison. Poison cupboards in school laboratories contain some surprising compounds. Another thing is that I know the parties involved—all three of them to some extent, and particularly the woman who was taken to court. I can believe that the man who died was a suicide type, but I’m certain the woman was not. What it seems to boil down to is either that the man intended to kill himself and to take the woman with him without her knowledge, or that somebody else intended to murder the pair of them. I suspect that it was this last, and, as I say, this new bit of knowledge confirms my suspicions, but it doesn’t really produce any fresh evidence, except that this ‘somebody else’ could have got hold of poison.”

“You are referring, of course, to the death which took place at Little Monkshood fairly recently.”

“That’s it. I thought you’d pick up the trail.”

“I subscribe to a press-cutting agency which supplies me with anything the papers have to say about the Society’s properties. The Little Monkshood inquest and the subsequent proceedings were reported only locally, but, of course, I received the full account. By the way, Mr. Herring, I myself was sent a small item of news in connection with Castle Nanradoc.”

“Oh, really? What was that?”

“Miss Marion Jones, whom, you may remember, we put in charge of the country club and the medieval banquets, is

engaged to be married.”

“No, really? That’s good. Who’s the fellow? Anybody I know?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Herring. It is our member, Mr. Aloysius Rafferty.”

“What, the handsome Irishman? Well, I’m very glad. He’s a decent chap. I must send them a wedding present. I think the Society will want to weigh in with something, too. Remind me to bring up the subject at the committee meeting this afternoon. And there’s another item on the agenda. Did you send out those *addendum* slips concerning Croole church?”

“Certainly I did.”

“I need not have asked. Now back to my troubles.”

“I go beagling in my spare time, Mr. Herring.”

Timothy stared at him.

“You’ll never cease to surprise me or to compel my admiration. A fatiguing form of sport, I should have imagined, but what are you getting at in the present instance?” he asked. “That *non sequitur* is intriguing.”

“It has occasionally been my experience, sir, that the hare which has been started up first is not always the hare which is caught in the end.”

“Oh, Lord!” said Timothy. “Yes, I see what you mean. I hadn’t thought of that! Better not start up anything in the present instance. I think perhaps you’re right.”

“All the same, Mr. Herring, if you believe a murder has been committed . . .”

“Yes, I feel the same way. The only real evidence for my belief, though—if you can call it evidence—is my knowledge of the parties concerned, particularly my knowledge of one of them, as I said before, but now comes this little something which, while it doesn’t amount to much in the way of police-court evidence, does confirm my suspicions. It’s like this: it seemed at first that it was highly unlikely, although not absolutely impossible, that my suspect should

have been in the neighbourhood of Little Monkshood and so able to put the poison into the drinks there. Everybody concerned thought she was where she ought to have been, which was in the north of England—in Newcastle, to be precise, but she had a long week-end free at the end of October, and now, according to information which I received in this accidental way, she was in the neighbourhood of Little Monkshood at a time when the stuff could have been put into the bottles.”

“And the poisoned wine, or whatever it was, was drunk by the victims some time later, of course.”

“Yes. Five or six weeks later.”

“Forgive me for saying so, Mr. Herring, but your case seems a little thin.”

“I know. Against that, my suspect had a motive for causing the deaths of those two. She was insanely jealous of their relationship to one another. My view, you see, is that she found out that they had gone to Little Monkshood together, knew that, on Hallowe’en night, they had had a drink there, and knew that the bottles were left partly empty.”

“And poisoned them after the—er—lovers had gone?”

“That’s my theory, but the only evidence, so far, that she was anywhere near Little Monkshood that night rests on the unsupported word (spoken in all innocence, at that) of a small girl. It confirms my suspicions, but it’s not much to go on, is it?”

“As you say, Mr. Herring. Of course, if this woman was in the neighbourhood and had come from the north of England, she must have stayed the night somewhere.”

“A few discreet enquiries seem to be called for, you think. I see it’s a quarter past one. Have you had lunch?”

“Not yet. I was about to go to my usual place when you called in.”

“Well, come to my club and let’s fortify ourselves against this afternoon’s meeting. You’ve been a great help, I

may tell you. Talking to you has cleared my mind. I don't want to start an unwarrantable stink, but I can't just sit tight and do nothing. I'll get the small kid's word confirmed if I can, and then I shall have to think again."

The committee meeting lasted longer than usual. It had been called for three o'clock, and by twenty minutes past the hour the chairman, who was also the president of the Society, remarked to Timothy, who sat on his right, that he supposed all who were coming had turned up, so he might as well begin the proceedings. These followed their usual course, but a great deal of time was taken up by the debate which followed the treasurer's plea that the admission charge for entrance to Nanradoc Castle in Snowdonia should be raised from half-a-crown to three shillings. Most committee members had something to say on this, either for or against, and after a great deal of discussion and some relevant and (as is so often the case) some remarkably irrelevant arguments, a decision was taken to submit the matter to the annual general meeting.

"Bloody waste of time," muttered Parsons, who was seated next to Timothy. "Why can't it be left to the treasurer? He's got the facts and figures."

"People on committees do love the sound of their own voices," said Timothy. "That's why most of 'em put themselves up for election."

Following the abortive discussion, the next item concerned the remuneration of the curator. This was settled satisfactorily, and without consideration for the prejudices of the Prices and Incomes Board. *Other Business* began briskly and concerned nothing but minor points, one of which, the design of a new heading for the Society's notepaper, gave rise to acrimonious dispute which called for the authoritative intervention of the chairman. Then came the expected and always eagerly-awaited question:

"Anything for us this time, Tim?"

“Yes,” Timothy replied, “there are several matters we might like to think about before the next meeting. Got the letters there, Coningsby? Thanks. Well, ladies and gentlemen, there’s the question of the fourteenth-century bridge over the Haven river at Kingshaven. It’s not wide enough for modern road conditions and the local council want to widen it. It’s a good bridge and they’ll ruin it if they do. I think we might try to persuade them to build another bridge further up-river. That would be a lot cheaper for them than building a bridge at the east end of the town, because the river widens considerably as it goes. Moreover, they could easily divert the traffic west of the town, more easily than at the east.

“Then there are those almshouses in Catleigh Abbots. They’re scheduled for demolition. It would be a great pity if we allowed that to happen. A grant from us would probably save them. The site isn’t wanted for anything in particular. It’s simply that Catleigh Abbots doesn’t want the expense of repairing them.

“Then there’s Croole church, of which you’ve been notified. There is another matter coming up in connection with some documents, but I have so few details at present that I won’t trouble you with what I’ve got, and, when I do, you may think it is not our concern, and it may not be. Lastly, members will remember that we made ourselves responsible for repairing and restoring Little Monkshood in the County of Dorset. Ownership, however, does not rest with us. It is highly desirable, I think, that it should. If members agree, I should like us to suggest to the owner that she should sell. At present, members may remember, the agreement is to open the house to the public on one day a week for four months of the year. This seems to me insufficient. The house, although not unique, is of early date and a very good example of its period.”

“Have you made any approach to the owner?” asked Lady Grace Norton. “Have you any reason to think that she

might agree to sell? I, for one, would be glad if she did. It is insufficient, as Timothy—as Mr. Herring—says, to open it to the public (which includes ourselves, of course) only some—what would it be?—some dozen and a half times a year.”

“No, I have not formally approached the owner, but there is reason to suppose that she would not be averse to parting with the house. An unfortunate death, apparently a suicide, took place there recently, as members may recall, and the owner herself was involved.”

“If someone will propose a motion, I will put it to the meeting,” said the president. Lady Grace proposed, Parsons seconded, that an approach be made to Miss Marchmont Pallis to find out whether she would be willing to sell Little Monkshood to the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest, and the motion was carried with one abstention.

“I’m not voting *against* it,” said Timothy’s thorn-in-the-flesh, “but I’m certainly not voting *for* it. We seem to specialise in properties where somebody has died an unnatural death. I don’t like it. It’s ghoulish.”

“Do you suggest we should demolish the Tower of London, Berkeley Castle, the New Forest, Kenilworth, Holyroodhouse, and so forth?” asked young Rafferty. “Not to mention the towns of Drogheda and Wexford.”

“Ah, that reminds me,” said Timothy, “of a matter which requires your absence from the committee room for a few minutes, Aloysius me boyo. Hop it, laddie. We’ll call you back when we want you.”

Having rid the meeting of the firebrand, he broached the subject of Rafferty’s forthcoming nuptials, and the meeting was then declared closed.

“Well, Tim,” said the president, when he, Parsons, and Timothy were seated at dinner, “what’s all this about Miss Pallis agreeing to sell? I thought she was crazy about Little Monkshood.”

"While you were disporting yourself on your winter sunshine cruise, strange things have been happening," Timothy replied. He gave a short account of these.

"Oh, I see why you think she might be willing to sell," said the president. "Well, you can get on to her straight away now."

"Yes. I shall have to make a fairly tactful approach. She's not altogether easy to deal with."

"Pigheaded?"

"I think so."

"Still, if this man died in the house, and she herself nearly did, you'd suppose she'd have taken a bit of a slant. Anyway, good luck to your efforts. The Society could do with Little Monkshood. What, by the way, was the reason for the suicide? An unhappy love affair, as it's called?"

"I must have notice of that question."

"That's a cagey sort of answer."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Timothy agreed.

"You wouldn't care to enlarge on it, I suppose?"

"Not at present. You see, I don't believe the chap *did* commit suicide. This unhappy love affair, as you call it, had been going on for years. There didn't seem any real reason why it shouldn't have gone on for years more."

"Come off it, Tim," said Parsons. The president raised his eyebrows, but his curiosity remained unsatisfied. Timothy slept at his club and next morning left London immediately breakfast was over, and drove pensively to Peterminster and the *George* hotel. Here, he thought, if anywhere, was the place where he might get Sandra's ingenuous statement confirmed. He was actuated by no vengeful feelings towards Vere Pallis. His urge was not even impelled by what is known as vulgar curiosity. Simply, he wanted to *know*, almost in the sense that a research student wants to know. What he proposed to do with his knowledge, if he gained any, he had not the slightest idea. The thought of bringing Vere Pallis to book, so far as the law was

concerned, became more and more repugnant to him the more he thought about it, so, ostrich-like, he decided not to think about it, the equivalent of burying his head in the sand.

He was well known in the hotel by this time. After he had signed the register, he turned back the pages until he found the dates he was looking for.

"Not many visitors this time of year, Mr. Herring," said the receptionist.

"Did you have an All Hallows party?" asked Timothy, still searching the columns of hasty and mostly untidy writing.

"I've never heard of such a thing. We do our usual Christmas—you know, three days" inclusive."

"I know—inclusive of crackers, paper hats, and squeakers." He continued to turn back the pages.

"Well, people seem to enjoy it, Mr. Herring. Saves them all the bother of cooking their own turkey and inviting their relatives to Christmas dinner."

"I suppose so, yes." He found the page he wanted. "Here it is," he said.

"Here's what, Mr. Herring?"

"Probably the book-in for your All Hallows party. Hallowe'en, I suppose I should say. October thirtieth." He turned the book towards her. "There's your list of week-end guests. Read that."

"What for?"

"Just a bet with a friend of mine."

"Not trying to find out whether your wife and her boyfriend stayed here under the name of Mr. and Mrs. John Smith, I suppose, are you?"

Timothy grinned, and turned the book round again.

"I might be. Got to find *some* grounds for divorce, you know. I'm tired of having her wait behind the front door with her black-jack when I come home pie-eyed from the pub."

“Go on with you! I didn’t think you were married, and now I know you’re not. What’s this all about, anyway?”

“Who’s this Elsa McQueen?”

“Oh, her! A right one, *she* was. Broad as she was long, American, complained about everything.”

“Oh, really? I shouldn’t have thought there was much to complain about here. She must have been hard to please.” He scanned the rest of the entries and then turned to the list of names under October thirty-first. “This is the night,” he intoned, “when graves give up their dead. What have we here? Nothing but *les hommes*? Did you have a stag party that night, or what?”

“Four gentlemen and a lady, but the lady wasn’t with the gentlemen. They were four of our regulars. Commercial.”

“There are five names here, all men’s names.”

The receptionist switched round the book so that she could read the names right way up instead of upside down.

“That’s right,” she agreed. “Five men’s names, but Victor Prance was a lady. I suppose her real name was Victoria. Lots of girls prefer boys’ names, don’t they? You know, like Robin, Bobbie, Freddie, and all that—though I shouldn’t think it lasts into middle age.”

“What was this Victor Prance like?”

“To look at? Tall and thin and vinegary. What they used to call a proper schoolmarm, only schoolmarms aren’t so much like that nowadays. We get ‘em in here, a party of ‘em, when they’ve been paid or it’s breaking-up day, and a livelier lot you couldn’t wish for. Don’t spend much, mind you. It’s mostly sherry and cider and bitter lemon and hard-boiled eggs and sandwiches and pickled onions, but, my, they do enjoy themselves!”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Vere

It was not proof.

"I see it's the second name on the list," said Timothy.

"What is?"

"This Victor Prance. I suppose you don't remember at what time of day she clocked in?"

"Before lunch, anyway. I remember that, because I had to tell her her room wasn't quite ready. Old Mr. Blues didn't move out until one minute to twelve. He never does, the old so-and-so, but he's been coming here for years, off and on, and, anyway, we can't say anything, because twelve noon they're allowed up to, so he keeps to what you might call the letter of the law, but it makes it hard on the maids when they can't do out a room till the mid-day. So Miss Prance had to sit herself down in the lounge, and she wasn't very pleased, I can tell you."

"*Miss Prance?* Sure of that?"

"No wedding-ring. Signed the book with her left hand, so, of course, I noticed."

"I see she's given her address as London."

"That's right."

"Rather vague, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. So long as they sign in, and put British, whether they are or not, and something in the column for the address, I suppose we have to be satisfied. It's all the law seems to want, anyway. We've never had any trouble."

"It seems pretty casual to me. Suppose you'd had one of the train-robbers, or an escaped convict, book in here."

"He'd give a false name anyway, I should think, and he'd hardly give his address 'late of Parkhurst prison,' would he now?" She closed the book, put it aside, then gave Timothy a straight and shrewd glance. "I wasn't born yesterday, you know," she said. "What's all this about Victor-Victoria Prance? You're not CID, by any chance, are you?"

"No, I'm a founder-member of the international dope ring," said Timothy. "Miss Prance—an alias, of course—is one of our most valuable contacts in this country."

"Oh, Mr. Herring! You really are the limit!" giggled the receptionist. "Suppose anybody that didn't know you was to hear you!"

"I should be in dead trouble. I hope I may count upon your discretion?"

He decided to wait until after lunch before ringing up the school. Alison would be in class, he supposed, until the end of the morning, but while the girls were at games it might be possible to arrange a meeting with her to find out whether she had changed her mind again about selling Little Monkshood, or whether she was still prepared to let the Society have it.

The school secretary answered the telephone.

"Miss Pallis? Will you hold the line, please? Who shall I say is calling? Mr. Herring? Oh, how do you do, Mr. Herring? I think she's in the common room. Just a minute, and I'll see."

It was not long before he heard Alison's voice. Even over the telephone it was unmistakable.

"Hullo, Tim. Alison here. I'm terribly busy. Is it anything in particular?"

"Don't get in such a panic. This is mostly on business. Where can I meet you?"

"Look, I've stacks of history essays to mark and three sets of history notebooks to go through."

"Right. I'll be at school in half-an-hour's time."

"No, you can't come here. There's a reason. Constance has turned up. She's in a dreadful state. I can't stop to tell you now. Can't you say whatever it is over the telephone?"

"Very well, then. At least, I can say part of it."

"Why only part?"

"The rest is about Vere."

"Oh, dear! Very well. I'll meet you for tea at the mill-house at half-past four."

"Fair enough. Good-bye until then."

She was punctual, but Timothy was waiting for her. She found him standing at the roadside gazing across the river, and she joined him without saying anything. Then they went into the mill and he ordered tea. The table he had chosen was in a far corner, although the rest of the room was empty. Alison sat with her back to the dark-painted wall and Timothy moved a vase of early daffodils to one side so that he could see her. There was a lifelessness about her and a look of fatigue which distressed him. He smiled at her.

"Business now, or afterwards?" he asked.

"Just as you please," she answered.

"Tired?"

"Worried."

"Not my young friends?"

"The children? Oh, no. They're much as usual. Tim, how did the poison get into those bottles? Simon didn't commit suicide, you know."

"I'm afraid it's all too obvious, my dear. She was down here at the end of October. That little gingertop Sandra saw her, and I'm certain she stayed at least one night at the *George*, in Peterminster."

"I didn't tell you, but she rang me up from there. She wanted to see me. I didn't go, partly because my excuse that I couldn't avoid showing up at the Hallowe'en party was true so far as it went, but, of course, that wasn't the only

reason. I'd made this arrangement with Simon to show him the finished house and drink a toast to it."

"You didn't suggest, then, that if she wanted to see you she could come along to the school? I can see you wouldn't want her at Little Monkshood if you were going to meet him there later in the evening."

"I thought she would have no reason to meet me unless she wanted to quarrel, but now I'm wondering whether she had only needed half a term to see that she'd given up a rather easy job at Purfleet for a much tougher one in Newcastle, and wanted to persuade me to use my influence with Miss Pomfret-Brown."

"To give her her old post back again?"

"Yes. I wouldn't have done it, of course, but I'm glad I didn't think of it at the time. I'd have hated to disappoint her. Whatever she is, and whatever she may have done, I can't help feeling very sorry for her."

"It's all too clear what she may have done, I'm afraid."

"The only thing is—oh, they're bringing the tea—the only thing is," Alison went on when she had filled the cups and the waitress had gone out of the room, "that anybody might have drunk the stuff, you know. I mean, up to that time, and for a week or two afterwards, anybody could have got into Little Monkshood. You heard what the foreman said to the magistrates. There were workmen in and out, doing all sorts of little clearing-up jobs until at least the middle of November, and then I left the place unlocked for the convenience of the furniture people, as I couldn't always be there when things were delivered. Suppose children, or a tramp, had got in and tried an experimental swig out of those bottles? Surely Vere would have thought of that? She wasn't prepared to wish anybody dead except Simon and me—especially me."

"Where did you put the bottles when you and Simon had drunk your toast to the house?"

"We left them on the window-seat in the solar. Anybody could have got at them, as dear old P.-B. pointed out to the Bench." She flushed and smiled for the first time since they had met that afternoon. "It's a good thing the presiding magistrate is her godson, or she would have been committed for contempt of court and thrown into a dungeon, I should think."

I don't believe a magistrates' court *can* commit for contempt but she certainly was a breezy performer," said Timothy. "Reverting to the subject under advisement, my own opinion is that Vere was so jealous of you and Simon that her only aim and object was to do you both a mischief. I don't suppose anything occurred to her except that. She was sure that, at some time or another, you would come back and use the bottles again."

"The single-track mind? Yes, Vere has that, I think. But you said you wanted to see me on business, as well as talk about Vere."

"Let's finish one thing at a time. You said over the telephone that Vere was at the school and was—to quote your actual words—in a dreadful state. Tell me more about it."

"She's got three days' compassionate leave of absence from her school—she seems to have told them that I was terribly ill—and she's come down here to plead."

"With Miss Pomfret-Brown?"

"Yes. She wants so much to come back."

"Surely the High Priestess won't wear it?"

"It's difficult, Tim. We've never been able to find a science teacher since Vere left. P.-B. has tried, but when they come for interview and find the so-called chemistry lab. is the gatekeeper's cottage, naturally, if they're qualified and any good, they jib. Of course, to do her justice, if they're unqualified she won't take the risk of letting them loose among the chemicals. Vere is very well qualified, likes a lazy life and can at least keep order. If it weren't for me, P.-

B. would have Vere back tomorrow, and, even so, when she's weighed the pros and cons, I think she will, in spite of what she thinks of her as a person."

"Great minds are apt to think alike, they say."

"What do you mean by that? Which are the great minds?"

"Mine and Miss Pomfret-Brown's. She is counting on your loving and leaving her. That's why she'll have Vere back."

"Even if Vere came back on the staff, I shouldn't leave the school. I don't run away from Vere. I never have."

"Not even to get married?"

"Don't be silly."

"Again my mind marches with that of the Matriarch. She reminded me—not that I needed the reminder—how wrong-headed, obstinate, proud and cussed you are."

"Another cup of tea?"

"And she suggested that I should beat you."

"If you've quite finished, perhaps we could discuss the business matter which you mentioned."

"Oh, that? Yes. We were wondering whether you would be prepared to sell Little Monkshood to the Society. You did say something about it, if you remember."

"I've changed my mind."

"Even if you are going to be married?"

"Once and for all . . ."

"Once, and, I hope, for all. I am not in favour of divorce."

"Are you *ever* serious? If you've had enough tea, let's go. I have to take prep. at six."

Timothy took leave of her at the school gates.

"All I can say, apart from *au revoir*, is what the Arabs say." He took off his hat. "My head, my hand, and my heart at your feet. You might write it in your diary, will you? I should like you to keep it in mind."

"Fancy having Vere Pallis back again!" said Mavis.

"Not till next term," said Caroline.

"It was perfectly sickening, the way we all had to clap when Miss Salter told us," said Stephanie.

"My parents had a letter in the Easter holidays," said Gillian. "We're going to have a proper lab. It's to be out in the grounds somewhere. I suppose it will cost the earth. My father says it will, and that means the fees will go up. He says what do girls want with a lab., anyway. He's terribly unwith it."

"Before they move all the stuff out of the present lab.," said Connie Moosedeer, "we ought to help ourselves to what we shall want for Guy Fawkes Day."

"We shall be in Lower Four." said Sandra. "Only kids keep Guy Fawkes Day. I'll tell you what, though. We never really took the spell off Little Monkshood. Mr. Herring stopped us. We ought to do that before it's too late."

"Too late for what?"

"There's a notice in the local paper. It's going to be open to the public next Saturday and so on, for ever and ever."

"But it's all locked up. We could never get in before next Saturday." said Veronica.

"We could get in *on* next Saturday." Sandra pointed out, "and I vote we do."

"What for? It's going to cost half-a-crown each."

"We needn't all go. I'll have to, because I was chief witch, and you'll have to come, I suppose, Veronica, because we initiated you specially, and Connie can be the third, if she likes."

"I'll be the third." said Gillian.

"No, you'll muck things up. You'll try to be boss, and you can't be, because I am. Now, three half-crowns, that's seven and six, so that's a shilling all round, and I don't mind giving the extra sixpence because I'm the leader."

"It said children half-price. I saw the notice," said Connie Moosedeer.

"All the better. Sixpence each, and ninepence for me."

"I don't see why those who aren't going should pay sixpence," argued Gillian.

"You can have my place, Gillian. I don't want to go," said Veronica.

"No, she can't! You've *got* to go," snapped Sandra.

"What do you think we made you a member for?"

"But Mr. Bennison *died* there!"

"Well, Miss Pomfret-Brown said that wasn't our fault," said Caroline.

"A fat lot *she* knows about it!" said Sandra. "Of course it was our fault. I've thought about it time and again, and I don't see what else anybody can think. We put a curse on the place, and somebody died."

"Marchmont didn't die, though, and she was with him," said Mavis.

"I expect the guilty wolf was punished and the innocent lamb escaped," said Gillian unctuously.

"What *are* you talking about?" asked Caroline. "You don't really think . . .?" Her eyes grew round and large with delighted horror.

"Yes," said Gillian impressively. "They were treading the primrose path of silken dalliance. We had a housemaid who did that with the chauffeur, so, of course, she had to be dismissed."

"You haven't *got* a chauffeur," said Sandra, withering her. "And Marchmont isn't a housemaid."

"Who said she was? She was resisting his importunate advances when he was struck down in the midst of his infamy."

"Where on earth did you pick up all that rot?"

"It isn't rot. It was in an old magazine I found in the attic cupboard at home."

“Well, it *is* rot, anyway. And stop wasting time. We haven’t got all day. Now, then, those of you who are not coming to Little Monkshood on Saturday are responsible for getting what we need out of the cottage before the new lab. is built. Gillian can organise that. Don’t take any phosphorus. It’s dangerous. Grab any magnesium wire you see—things like that. Oh, and litmus paper ought to come in useful. If we ever start the coven again, we shall need things to make spells. Don’t take anything that looks like stealing, but a retort and a few beakers and test-tubes might be useful and will never be missed.”

“How will we get into the cottage?” asked Caroline.

“Since Vere left, and we haven’t had a science mistress, I expect Miss Salter or Miss Pomfret-Brown has the only key.”

“Oh, Gillian will see to all that,” said Sandra blithely. “She likes to organise things.”

“I don’t see how you’re going to organise taking the spell off Little Monkshood if the house is going to be full of people,” said Gillian sourly.

“There isn’t much you *do* see,” retorted Sandra.

In spite of what she had said to Timothy, Alison was still prepared to sell Little Monkshood to the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest. Before the sale went through, she was astonished to receive a letter from her half-sister.

“I don’t suppose you will want to keep Little Monkshood after what has happened. I should like to make you an offer for it. You are better off than I, because you have your mother’s money as well as half of what our father left, but I can well afford to pay your price, about which I know you well enough to realise that you will be perfectly fair. I shall not live in the house, but shall turn it into a shrine for the lover you took away from me. I want us to be friends, so meet me halfway over this, and let bygones be bygones.

“You will know by this time that, as soon as I have worked out my notice here, I shall be on the staff of Purfleet again. The new laboratory, I am assured, will be ready for me, and I am renting the cottage laboratory from the school and shall furnish it as a residence, so we need hardly meet except at school lunch, but that is as you like.”

Alison read the letter twice, once hastily and angrily, and the second time slowly, attentively and, for some reason she could not explain to herself, with foreboding. She wrote back that same evening and informed Vere that the matter was out of her hands. The Society which had repaired and restored it had the first option on Little Monkshood, and, if she sold, it must be to them unless they were no longer interested. A week later she received a letter from Timothy. He had returned to his home and since their last meeting he had not so much as communicated with her.

“We have had a letter from Miss Constance Vere Pallis, and should like your comments before we answer it. Enclosed is a copy of the letter and our tentative reply,” he had written.

That was all. Alison was astonished and alarmed by her own sense of sickening disappointment. She hardly knew what she had expected from his letter, but the sheer anticlimax of this bald and businesslike communication was like falling through the ice into a bitter sea. The ice had been slippery enough at times, but at least it gave a glimpse of a further shore. Now, it seemed, there was no reason to look ahead.

She wrote back crisply:

“Of course I do not want Vere to have Little Monkshood. Her suggestion that your Society should sell out to her is ridiculous. Under no circumstances could I agree to it. I realise that there is no clause in our contract to prevent Phisbe from selling, if they feel so inclined, but my express wish is against this, if it means that Vere will become the owner.”

Timothy did not attend the official opening of Little Monkshood to the public. He had made a point of having a pressing engagement in Northern Ireland that week-end. The house was declared open by the president of Phisbe, who was supported by Tom Parsons, Lady Grace Norton, the treasurer, and other members of the Society. Valuable trade was put in the way of the mill-house restaurant, the curator was installed, and a small number of people, representing the general public, trickled in and out during the afternoon. During the last half-hour that the house was open, these included three little girls in light, summer frocks who had thoughtfully left their school straw hats in the bushes in the lane which led to the house.

"Now you know the drill," said Sandra, just before they reached the foot of the outside stone staircase which led up to the only door. "When they blow a whistle, or whatever they do to say the house is being closed, nip into the basement part where we've been before, and tuck yourselves away behind the pillars. If anybody spots us, of course we'll be bunged out, but that's all a matter of luck."

"Won't they realise we haven't left, though?" asked the practical Connie Moosedeer. "People always keep an eye on children in places like this, because they always think we're up to something."

"Not girls. That's only boys," said Sandra. "They know boys always *are* up to something. But if you're worried, I've got a plan. Now, first thing we do is get into the basement place and each pick a good pillar, so we'll know exactly where to go at closing time."

Vere Pallis was apprised, in a courteous and regretful letter from Phisbe that, although they were unable, owing to their own rules and constitution, to re-sell any property or properties acquired by them, Little Monkshood would be open to the public every day from two until five p.m., other

times by appointment. She caught the Friday evening train from Newcastle, breakfasted in London at the hotel she had booked for Saturday night, and paid her half-crown for admission to Little Monkshood at approximately four o'clock on Saturday afternoon.

She was still kneeling on the window-seat in the solar, gazing out over the distant Purbeck Hills, when Sandra, Veronica, and Connie Moosedeer were being given change for two half-crowns by a paternal curator at his little table in the reconstructed kitchen. They did not disturb her reverie, for they went nowhere nearer the solar than the top of the newel stair. They were the last visitors to be allowed into the house that day, and the kindly curator pointed out that it closed at five and that they would obtain better value for their money if they came at an earlier hour on another day.

This well-meant interest in them did not suit Sandra's book at all, and when they had crept down the newel stair and were in the basement, she made low-toned but acid comment on the curator's character, mutton-headedness, and lack of tact.

"We'll have to use my second plan," she said, "because he'll remember us now, and will notice we haven't left with the rest of the people. Now then, choose your pillars and then we'd better go up that winding staircase and look in the biggest room, in case anybody asks us, and then we go back to that man at the door."

Such visitors that still remained were beginning to straggle to the exit. Some had questions to ask. One or two bought postcards.

"Well," said the curator to the three children. "*You* can't have seen very much."

"Actually," said Sandra, a green light in her cat-like eyes, "we only came so as to be able to tell my mother whether it was worth while bringing the Women's Institute. And, oh," she added, her snub nose shining with enthusiasm, "oh, it is! It is!"

"Glad you liked it. You must come again. If you bring a party of ten or more, I can arrange to have somebody here to show you round. Tell your mother, will you? There would be no extra charge."

"That would be super. Could I have three of the postcards, please?—Our alibi, in case we're late back at school," she explained to the others when they got outside. They had not long to wait. Sandra, keeping watch from the garden and screened by the solid side-wall of the outside stair, gave a signal. The curator left his post and was going the rounds, gently chivvying the last of the visitors. He missed Vere, who had left her kneeling position on the window-seat and was hidden in the angle of the fireplace furthest from the archway entrance to the solar, and he missed the children, who had nipped back into the house and were now stifling their nervous giggling behind the massive pillars of the undercroft. Satisfied that, except for himself, the house was empty, he returned to his table by the front and only door, checked his money and his roll of tickets and then went home to his tea.

"This is it," muttered Sandra.

"We haven't got the wand and things," whispered Veronica.

"We only need draw the circles. I've got some chalk."

"What about an altar? That table we used has gone."

"I don't think it matters for this." She drew the three circles, quickly and clumsily. "That'll do," she said, chalking in the four dread names at the compass points.

"You haven't drawn the triangle," said Veronica. "Oh, I *shall* be glad when this is over!"

"We don't need the triangle. That's part of *invoking* the devils. What we're doing is getting rid of them, silly!"

"Oh, I see."

"I wonder if we ought to do it where Mr. Bennison actually died," said Connie Moosedeer. "Do you think it's any good if we do it down here?"

"Yes, of course it is! This is where we put the spell *on*, so this is where we have to take the spell *off*. That's only common sense."

"All right, so let's get on with it. Wonder whether the others have saved us anything from tea?"

"You can't think about that now! Pay attention, and both of you say after me . . ."

Upstairs in the solar Vere Pallis had heard the heavy sound of the front door being shut. So far as she knew, she was alone in the house. She crept to the archway and listened. A sound, as of muttered words, seemed to come to her, but she dismissed them as existing only in her nervous imaginings. She went back into the room and knelt before the great Tudor window. It faced directly west and looked into the setting sun which, even at that hour, was beginning to spread its gold across the sky.

"Oh, Simon!" she murmured. "Come back to me, my darling! It wasn't you I meant to kill! Come once more! Once more!" She held her head between her hands. Her heart seemed to keep time with the murmurings she thought she had heard before. She raised her head and stretched her thin arms wide. "Come to me, come! Once more, only once!" she cried. The murmurings from below became audible voices, then one voice predominated.

"Now I'll finish it off," said Sandra. "You'd better cross your fingers, because this is rather powerful.

'Asmodeus, creature of judgment,
Satan the adversary,
Behemoth, the beast from hell,
Diabolus, the down-flowing, killer of body and soul,
Belial, thou demon without a master,
Beelzebub, lord of flies,

Depart from hence, I conjure you, and haunt this house no more!"

"Now you both say the last bit with me, starting at *Depart*," said Sandra, in low and thrilling tones.

Vere, mad with mingled hope and terror, crept into the hall. Up from the depths of the house came the mingled voices, booming, unrecognisable, unearthly.

“Depart from hence, I conjure you, and haunt this house no more!”

“Simon! Simon!” shrieked Vere. She ran to the newel stair. “Stay, stay for me! Don’t go!” She tripped on the third stair down and lost her footing. Her egg-shell head crashed horribly against the unyielding wall.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Your Friend Alone

The petrified children ceased to breathe for a moment, then Veronica, bursting into hysterical tears, cried out:

“Oh, Sandra! What have you done! They’re here! They’re here in the house with us! They’ll kill us, like They killed Mr. Bennison!”

“Let’s get out,” said Sandra shakily.

“The other staircase! Quick!” said Connie Moosedeer. “I heard Them on this one!”

The other staircase, repaired and reinforced by Phisbe’s workmen, led into the great hall at the dais end. They stumbled up it in the darkness and raced for the outer door. It was locked. No amount of shaking and handle-twisting would budge it. It was as securely fastened as its originators could have wished, and the curator had taken away with him the impressive iron key.

Sandra rallied the hysterical Veronica.

“It’s all right. That was only Them going. We’ve got rid of Them! Don’t you see?”

The stolidly courageous Connie Moosedeer said:

“I guess we can drop out of the window.”

The Tudor window in the great hall matched the one in the solar. They returned to it, running quickly past the head of the newel staircase which was now blocked, although they did not know it, by the dead body of Vere Pallis. The window was at the back of the dais, and the workmen, in deference to modern prejudice, had given it an iron catch,

so that it could be opened. Sandra unfastened this, and they looked out. Below it the restorers had laid down flagstones. The risk was too great to be taken.

The children were not missed until it was time to go into Lower School for prep.

"Where *are* those lunatics?" demanded Gillian. "They ought to have been back ages before this!"

"Well, *we* can't help it," said Caroline.

"The notice in the paper said Little Monkshood shuts at five," said Stephanie. "They must have got locked in. Do you think we ought to tell Miss Salter?"

"They'll be missed at prep., anyway," said Mavis.

"Marchmont is on, and she always knows if anybody hasn't turned up. I vote we wait until then. Sandra won't thank us if we go and panic on her."

"But they may have got run over!"

"We'd have heard," said Gillian. "Get your books. There's the bell."

Alison, from their point of view, ran true to form.

"Please, Miss Pallis," said Gillian, in answer to her question, "we think they went out before tea."

"Where?"

"We don't quite know. They said they were going to look over Little Monkshood. It's open for the first time today. They—they thought it would be good for them to see it."

"Why?"

"Well," said Gillian, attempting an ingratiating smile, for, with all her envy of Sandra, she was a loyal member of the gang when it became necessary to hold the fort for a delinquent sister, "I think they thought it would be good for their history."

"What is good for their history is for me to decide, isn't it?"

"They're—they're ever so interested in history, Miss Pallis."

"I'm glad to hear it. Go and find Miss Salter and tell her that they are absent from preparation."

Miss Salter was irritable. She was busy on next term's timetable. She usually prepared a rough draft before Whitsun which could then be altered to accommodate changes on the staff—a frequent occurrence at the end of the school year. In the present instance she was trying to equate the absence of a visiting music master with the presence of a resident science mistress, unaware that in this respect she was wasting her time. She received Gillian with ill-concealed rancour.

"Well, what is it? I can't see you now! You had better stand there until I can attend to you."

"Please, Miss Salter, Miss Pallis sent me."

This was sufficiently unusual for Hildegarde to raise her eyebrows. Junior staff, faced with impudence or insubordination, often sent children to her for disciplinary action, but it was far beneath the dignity and below the capabilities of senior staff to do so. Gillian, she felt, must have committed an offence of some magnitude.

"I am sorry you have given Miss Pallis so much trouble." It was her dreaded stock phrase before she opened the flood-gates of torrential fury on a culprit. Gillian hastened to explain.

"I haven't been sent out of prep. It's only that some girls haven't turned up, so Miss Pallis told me to . . ."

"Which girls? . . . Oh, I see. Go back to Miss Pallis and tell her that I'll see to it. I imagine," she said, when she had made her report to Miss Pomfret-Brown, "that the little nuisances have been playing hide-and-seek in Little Monkshood and have got themselves locked in. It's just the sort of thing Sandra Davidson *would* do!"

"Perhaps you would take your car and go along. If they *are* there, can we get hold of a key?"

"Alison may still have one."

"I very much doubt it, now that she's sold the house."

Alison had relinquished her keys (two had been provided by the contractors), but she knew the address of the curator.

The children were huddled in the undercroft. The searchers, first attempting to descend by the stair which was nearest to the front door, found that they could not use it.

Alison plodded her way through the rest of the term. On his return from Northern Ireland Timothy found a letter from her, but he had already read of Vere's death. He went to the hotel at Peterminster and telephoned from there.

"I've had your letter. I already knew, of course. I'm at the *George*. Do you think I might come and see you?"

"I think not, Tim. I don't need you. It's been a shock, but I'm getting over it. It's no good pretending I'm sorry about Vere's death. I don't know what I feel, but it certainly isn't grief. It's only a few weeks now until the end of the term. I'll meet you then, if you like."

"What are you doing about a holiday?"

"I haven't made any plans."

"The Parsons are going to Yorkshire. There's some stuff Tom and I want to look at. You would be a companion for Diana while we're at work. It would be a real kindness to her if you'd come."

"Is yours a Phisbe job?"

"Yes, we're hoping to find something good. Do think it over. We shan't be staying at hotels. We've taken a house. Diana is bringing maids and I'm supplying my cook. You'd like it, I think, unless you can think of anything better to do."

His voice, although friendly, was impersonal. Alison promised to think about his suggestion and agreed, in a casual tone which matched his, that she thought it sounded

fascinating. It took her less than the next day and night to decide that she would accept the invitation. The fact that Timothy had made little effort to get in touch with her meant that his lighthearted references to marriage were merely part of his play-boy attitude to the world in general. She had never, she told herself that night, she had never even begun to take him seriously.

Nor did she need to do so until they had been on holiday for almost three weeks, for, except at meal-times and sometimes, even then, only at breakfast and dinner, she saw little of either of the men, especially as early bed appeared to be their custom.

The house, which had been rented for a month, was in the new part of Robin Hood's Bay, above the maze of steps and narrow streets which led down to the shore. One evening, towards the end of the third week, Tom Parsons announced that he and Timothy had concluded their survey and that on the morrow he proposed to devote himself to his wife.

"And about time," said Diana. "You can take me to Harrogate for the day, and give me lunch at the *Majestic*. I want to do some shopping."

"That leaves us to ourselves," said Timothy to Alison. "What is your pleasure, ma'am?"

"I'd like to go for a good long walk," she replied. "Do you know of one where we need not retrace our steps? I do hate having to come back the same way as I went out."

"It looks quite different the other way round, though," argued Timothy. Suspecting, rightly, that this innocent-sounding statement had double meaning, she did not contest it, and he went on, "We could take the cliff path into Whitby and come back on the bus."

"Diana and I have been to Whitby twice."

"All right, then. We'll descend to the shore when the tide is on the ebb, and walk along the sands as far as we can, and then climb up to Ravenscar. That's about four miles.

From there we can make our way on to the moors, if you like."

Tom and Diana left in Tom's car at ten. Timothy, who had gone with them in order to hand-signal Tom on to the road, as the turning to it from the drive was a blind one, looked critically at the sky before he returned to the house.

"It's going to rain," he told Alison. "If we're walking, you'd better put on gum-boots and a waterproof. Anyway, there's no particular hurry. The tide isn't on the turn until eleven. Personally, I think a trip by car will turn out to be a better proposition than a walk."

"Oh, no," she said. "Diana and I have been out in her car every day. I'm aching for a good long walk. What does a drop of rain matter? I like being out in the wet."

"Yes, you do, don't you?" said Timothy. She glanced at him sharply, but he was not even looking at her. "Well, I've dozens of pages of notes to sort out, so, if you don't mind, I'll get on with the job until we start for our walk. Have you anything which will keep you going for an hour?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I have lots of things I can do. I want to write some letters. I'll go to my room, then you can have the whole of the table."

"Good-o," said Timothy carelessly. "I do like to spread myself out. I'll yell for you when I'm ready, unless you come down before that."

They left the house at ten minutes to eleven, but by the time they had to abandon the beach and take a zig-zag path which would bring them eventually to the hotel where they proposed to have lunch, the weather had made up its mind and the rain began.

A wind, keen and strong, blew in from the sea and drove the rain on to their backs as they climbed the cliff. The path became slippery and difficult, and soon the rain turned it into a miniature stream. By the time they reached the hotel they were so extremely wet that Alison said:

"We can't go in there and have lunch."

"I agree. We'll have a quick drink, and I'll get them to order a car."

He said nothing during the short journey back to the house, except to answer the only question she put to him.

"You said I ought to have worn a raincoat. Are you very angry because I didn't?"

"No," he said. "After all, I didn't take my own advice, did I?"

"We'd better toss for first bath when we get back. I'm not only wet through, I'm covered in mud," she said, laughing. He made no reply until they were standing in the hall.

"Up you go," he said. Realising that, until she had had her bath, he would refuse to have his, she gave one look at his sopping-wet trouser-legs, and did not stop to argue.

Timothy followed her up the stairs, switched on the electric fire in his room, pulled off his saturated clothes and shoes, put on his dressing-gown and lit a cigarette. By the time he had tossed the stub out of the window there came a tap on the door.

"Tim, I'm through. You'd better give the immersion heater another few minutes, perhaps."

By the time, comfortable, dry, and dressed, he got downstairs, she was seated on a stool by the fire and was drying her hair.

"Let me," he said. He pulled an armchair up, behind the stool. "Lean back against me. It will be more comfortable for you."

"Nobody has dried my hair for me since I was a child," she said.

"No?" His tone indicated that he had no interest in the subject. "You ought to let it grow a bit. Why don't you?"

"Oh, for school it's handier to have it short."

"I suppose so." There was silence between them for the next ten minutes. "Well, there you are. I don't know whether

I'd call it absolutely dry, but at least it won't drip," he said, handing her the towel.

"Thank you. I'd better go and comb it."

"Not for a minute. Do you remember I asked you to keep something in mind?" He took the towel from her, dropped it on to the floor and put his arms over her shoulders with a hand on each of her breasts. She did not move, neither did she ask him what he meant. She said, in a low tone:

"Yes, Tim. It's quite impossible."

"Of course it isn't. Give me one reason why."

"I'm nearly thirty."

"Well, I'm thirty-three. What could be fairer than that?"

"I should only spoil your life."

Timothy crossed his arms over one another so that she was completely imprisoned. He put his cheek against her damp hair, and said softly:

"Don't be so damned conceited!"

About the Author



Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and history, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex Education Society, and the British Olympic Association. Her

father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.